

Storytelling for Participatory Exchange

Overview of methodology



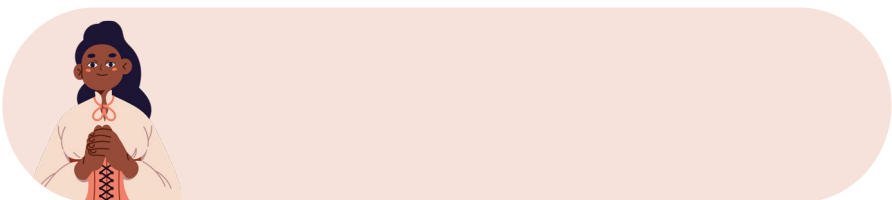
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Introduction

In recent years traditional ideas of development and growth are starting to give way. Diverse voices are increasingly being sought out in decision-making spaces, as values and practices continue to modernise. Many are seeking to rewrite our governance approaches, with the aim to work towards more balanced socioeconomic systems and built environments. These approaches seek to actively engage a broader range of communities, both to identify the diverse challenges of modern living and to design of solutions to solve them. The citizen sciences are flooded with new participatory methods, leveraging different technologies, social theories and interdisciplinary expertise. Many of these however fall short in achieving the results they attempt to, and often exacerbate social divide and distrust. Is there another way that we can organise citizen participation that will allow us to listen to and learn from each other effectively? Yes, using storytelling.

Storytelling offers a means to authentically and effectively engage with citizens. It is a fundamentally human mode of communication where the goal is to understand each other better through the creation of shared imaginaries. Stories have the power to change our opinions and our interpreted realities, depending on who is telling the story, how they are telling it and who is listening. By utilising storytelling in participatory processes, we can dive deep into the experiences and perspectives of citizens and use these to ignite change in our living environments.

Our methodology; storytelling for participatory exchange offers a simple, constructive and impactful way to better understand the perspectives and desires of populations. The fundamental of the methodology is that by enabling citizens to create imaginary representations of their real-life lived experiences, we can develop a stronger understanding of their concerns, ideas and desired futures. The methodology is designed to fit a range of contexts and allows for different techniques and methods to be attached to it. Crucially, it is easy to understand, straightforward to deploy, enjoyable for participants and effective in producing actionable insights for decision making.



In a nutshell

Our methodology enables citizens to express their perspectives on their living environment and their desires for the future by telling imaginary stories that reflect their real life experiences. The principle is that in creating imaginaries that reflect our real experiences, we indicate our deep thoughts and feelings towards a situation. This is because we utilise both the cognitive (logical, evidence-based) and affective (emotional, feelings-based) dimensions of our minds, expressing both what we think and how we feel about it. Our methodology taps into this to produce deep insights.

We have designed a step-by-step methodology to guide you through the whole process of using storytelling for participatory exchange. The methodology includes approaches for contextual exploration and community mapping, the use of storytelling in a workshop setting, in-depth analytical procedures, and guidance on the sharing of insights with audiences.

1 Citizens
telling
stories

2 Reflecting
their real
experiences

3 Through
imaginary
tales

Our methodology can be deployed by anyone organising a project or activity where there is a need to engage citizens. It is designed to accommodate your unique objectives and can be moulded to different locations, languages and social contexts. It is free to use and all the resources have been designed to make the process as simple as possible to follow. And we understand that different projects have different specifications, so we have designed our methodology to be connected to different modes of engagement, visualisation, and output.



How we create value

The storytelling for participatory exchange methodology is more than just a participatory process. Its value is anchored in its ability to combine explorations of citizen perspectives with deep dives into the emotive significance of their experiences.

In workshop settings, we use storytelling as a mode of communicating. This allows participants to utilise both the cognitive (logical, evidential, analytical) and affective (emotional, moral, social) parts of their brain. Through the creation of imaginaries, participants also draw on their lived experiences, helping to accurately reflect their challenges and potential solutions.

After workshops, we use a combination of literary and sentiment analysis to produce insights that reflect both the cognitive and affective, drawing conclusions from what was said as well as emotive factors such as importance, urgency and responsibility. This unique approach enables a variety of forms of data visualisation, to make sure that outputs speak the right language. Good storytelling is all about relatability.

Our methodology is able to deal with a number of pitfalls that reduce the impact of other participatory processes. The core of the methodology, creating stories to represent personal perspectives and experiences, addresses participatory fatigue by presenting an enjoyable and constructive activity for participants. It allows for complex situations to be approached through imaginaries, navigating barriers for those less willing and able to participate. It is a complete process, deployed early in citizen participation projects, and able to produce actionable outcomes for those deploying it.

**Addresses participatory
fatigue**

**Navigates social
barriers to participation**

**Engages less-heard
voices**

**Produces constructive
outputs**

**Combats complexity in
participation**

**Deploys early in
projects**



The 4 phases

Scoping

The first stage where the topics and challenges that citizens will tell stories about are defined and where participants are identified and brought to the table.

Workshopping

The main phase where storytelling workshops are held with citizens. Our step-by-step storybuilding process is used to help participants create imaginary stories that reflect the challenges they have experienced in their real lives, and their ideas for the future. Different modes of visualising these stories can be connected here, including our own AI-powered storytelling platform.

Analysing

The analytical phase where literary and sentiment analysis is used to understand the issues, roles, ideas, and desired futures that participants express in their stories. Our semi-automated text analysis of participant stories explores the metaphors created between the real and imaginary. Sentiments are grouped across participants, to identify consensus of perspective.

Deploying

The last phase in our methodology that sees various outputs created from insights, to spark further collective action. These outputs can range from data-based graphical reports, to collage-like images of participant perspectives. Outputs are ready to be deployed to key stakeholders, through mechanisms familiar to them.



The methodology in depth



Scoping

Scoping

The first phase in our methodology is scoping, a crucial and often overlooked component of the participatory process. There is a tendency when organising participation activities to jump right into the good stuff, organising workshops and inventing exciting new activities that we feel will inspire participants. The issue with this is that we end up skipping the part where we consider the context, the communities that really need to be engaged in the process and how best to engage them. This can lead to limitations in impact as a result of participation tools that ignore unique socio-cultural needs (Kurkela et al., 2024) and the repeated engagement of communities that are tired of participating (Kern & Hooghe, 2018).

So how can we do this better? The answer is that before we even think about what activity to organise, we need to properly explore the **issues, impacted peoples and objectives** of the participatory process. This allows us to carefully plan the approach for activities to be organised, considering contextual factors.

In our methodology, the scoping phase contains an **exploration and a planning step**. This is designed to break up the work and make it easier to explore different aspects in sufficient depth. This means holding discussions with core players on the topic at hand, to collect data that will help to define the details of the participatory approach in the planning step.

Our methodology take a systematic approach to maximise impact, however it is important that the scoping phase, and the whole methodology, is adapted to the context at hand. When designing your own implementation, we encourage you to consider a number of key aspects, which you will find here highlighted in **bold**.

Want to know more
about how we do this in detail?
We offer advisory, training and
contracting services for the
scoping phase.



Exploration

The exploration step uses a roundtable type approach to understand the context in detail and identify communities involved. It begins by **gathering the core players**. We consider who is experienced in the area, who has been involved in similar projects and who is connected to those likely to be impacted. This includes: local government, spatial planners, developers and construction companies, civil society organisations and resident groups.

With the team assembled, we can **start talking**. This can be done in a group meeting, where every player is present, or in smaller group meetings, depending on logistics and working relationships. The point of the discussions is to generate a more complete picture of the potential impacts of the intervention on the range communities in the setting. We do this by exploring two topics in parallel:

Reflecting on the context of the intervention by exploring relevant aspects from:

The past

What issue is it addressing?
Who was historically impacted?
What are the historical barriers?

The present

How will it be designed?
How will it be implemented?
Who will be impacted?
What might their response be?
How long will it last?

The future

What will the result seek to do?
Who will benefit from it?
Who may be left out?
What wider agenda does it work towards?

Mapping communities that are likely to be impacted by the intervention, especially those that are less heard.

Considering the communities who live in the area, who used to live in the area and who may live in the area in the future. Also considering those who may be impacted by knock-on effects, i.e. if one area changes, will it create changes in others? A particular focus is taken to socio-cultural factors, to make sure that less-heard communities are properly represented (Natarajan, 2017) . Interventions are subject to and play into historical phenomena, so diverse barriers to participation due to factors like race, gender, age, class, and disability should be considered (Pateman et al., 2021).

Planning

The planning step of the scoping phase is where the design and organisation of the process take place. Of course we know we are going to have a workshop where citizens tell stories about their living environments. But, why? What will that help us to achieve? What information will it give us? And what should participants tell stories about? The exploration step should have given us a good idea of what the context looks like and what the issues at hand are for different communities. This information is key for defining the approach of the process and it enables us to **set the objectives of the process, the topics to be explored in the workshop, who to bring to the table and the details of the workshop.**

Defining objectives and topics

Defining the objectives of the process means operationalising the overall goal of the intervention against the contextual factors found in the exploration step, to set objectives that are **constructive, able to be integrated into the planning process and relevant to the lives of residents.** With storytelling **the objective is always to understand something better** (R. Gupta & Jha, 2022), but what we want to understand varies depending on the intervention, the histories of impacted communities and what information can be the most useful for implementers. Crucially, the objective must be defined in realistic terms, considering **what the process can actually influence in the broader intervention,** which may vary depending on when the activity is organised, which aspects of the planning process are pre-determined and what aspects are essential for the implementer. This consideration is essential to avoid participatory budgeting for clientelist aims (Gherghina et al., 2023) or the organisation of participatory activities motivated by compliance instead of civic impact (Soukop et al., 2021) that limit the depth of participation and frustrate those involved in the process. In making sure the objective relates to aspects of the intervention that can actually be changed, a reflection should also be made on the institutional agendas to which the intervention is aligned. This is so as to avoid a situation where the participatory process is performed without being integrated into decision making, ensuring the results are able to influence governance mechanisms (Kurkela et al., 2024).

Having defined the objective of the participatory process, in attainable terms, the topics that participants should be directed to tell stories about can be determined. The essence of storytelling for participatory exchange is that participants tell imaginary stories to reflect their real experiences, so the topics should refer to real phenomena. They should be defined considering what information they would give that addresses the objective.

Scoping

For instance, if the objective is to understand the features to be included in a local wilderness area, asking residents to tell stories about their positive and negatives experiences with nature can reveal the type of things to include and not include in the space. They should also be interesting to participants, after all we want people to turn up!

Identifying and inviting participants

Getting people to turn up may seem more straight forward than it is. Participation has often been organised in extractive ways for a very long time, and often results in fatigue among those participating, with little visibility of the impacts of their engagement (Kern & Hooghe, 2018). Conversely, many communities have historically been left out of public participation (Glimmerveen et al., 2022) and face systemic barriers to their trust in participatory processes (Pateman et al., 2021). Navigating these dynamics can be tricky, and relies on two things: sufficiently **understanding the range of communities who should be brought to the table** and **designing impactful strategies to get them to come**.

For the first point, we use the data collected in the exploration step and map communities relevant to the intervention. This considers those impacted by past, present and future factors as well as those indirectly impacted. The approach is to visualise the community landscapes, **sketching the different geo socio-cultural groups and their interconnections**, based on the information from discussions in the exploration phase

We use our own process of community mapping for this. Get in touch for advisory, training and contracting services.



Then, **connections should be made**. This means finding ways to reach these communities. Local bridging actors are key here; think social clubs, civil society organisations, resident groups, etc. that can help to access communities and also can be drawn into the process to further identify and map communities that should be involved. This process of snowballing helps to locate less heard groups and maximise inclusivity in the process.

It is worth taking a minute here to discuss how local bridging actors can be accessed and how trust can be built. The key is to meet them on their terms. Every organisation operates with its own modes of communication. Understanding how these work and locating access points can help to reach target communities through their familiar channels.

It is important here that human connections are made. Trust built through institutional branding is fragile and politically malleable, whereas trust between people is much more robust. Showing a human face can encourage organisations to help us invite participants, and may make people more likely to show up to our workshops.

Once we have a good idea of who should be invited to the workshop, we can **design strategies to invite them**. The most important aspect to consider here is incentive. Why should someone turn up? Many participatory approaches do not sufficiently explain the societal and collaborative benefits to participants (Malpass et al., 2023). Communication strategies should be designed that clearly **highlight the benefit of participating**, and that acknowledge the histories and context-specific factors that may impact a community's willingness to participate. Incentives should also be considered in physical terms. People may be willing to participate if they feel the process will be meaningful, but they will be even more willing if they think it will be fun and that they will get something from it. Will there be cake? Will participants be given gift cards? Remember we are asking people to volunteer their time and we should give them something in return.

We also need to make sure people receive the message, so we should **consider the communication channels that are familiar to those we wish to engage** and utilise these to reach them. Which spaces do community members frequent? Can online groups and pages be accessed?

Lastly, the communication material needs to be attractive. A powerful approach is to **use imageries that are familiar to the target audience**, such as artwork from the local area, or images that the target community is likely to relate to. Design is important!



Planning the workshops

The last part of the planning step is to **define the organisational details of the workshop**, to make sure it is set up in the most optimal way. There are many factors in the design of participatory processes that can impact the quality of responses from participants, and it is important to get this right. The planning step also provides a moment to **reflect on resource availability and design the approach accordingly**, to ensure that the process is not interrupted or abandoned half way through (Davies et al., 2022).

The first point is when to have the workshop. This refers to **timing within the participatory process itself**, as well as **optimal scheduling for community members**. Within the participatory process it is recommended to hold workshops as early as possible. This is to ensure that there is **enough time to process results and adjust aspects of the intervention**. Often participatory processes are organised too late to be able to influence interventions, leading to participant frustration as their time and contributions are not honoured (Kern & Hooghe, 2018). We also consider community availability. For instance, if community members are busy with seasonal work, when should we have the workshop?

As well as the timing, the location of the workshop is important to consider. Space has a strong influence on our willingness to be open and reflective. Hosting participatory activities in government buildings, for instance, may alienate some participants. Equally, holding workshops in overly familiar spaces may overly emphasise particular associations and impact the perspectives of participants. **Locations for workshops should be neutral, approachable, and with sufficient resources to host the workshop smoothly.**

Another key consideration is who will facilitate the workshop. Trust is directly related to interpretations of power and this is heavily influenced by personal perceptions. **Finding the right hosts for workshops can make or break the quality of outcomes.** Selecting facilitators goes back to the contextual factors, considering things like formality, trusted socio-cultural backgrounds, representation of participant identities, and language issues.

The last thing to consider is what to do with the results of the process. Many participatory processes are not institutionally embedded and the outcomes are not properly utilised within governance structures (Kurkela et al., 2024). It is important to **plan from the beginning how you will use the results and who they will be made available for**. The main thought process here is on producing impact, and defining final audiences that will be able to use the results to make actual change. This will come back in the final deployment phase.



Workshopping

Workshopping

Hosting a storytelling workshop where citizens are enabled to tell imaginary stories to represent their real life experiences is the core of the storytelling for participatory exchange methodology. It is in the storytelling workshops that citizens have the chance to share their thoughts and feelings about planned or ongoing interventions. This provides data from both the cognitive and affective domain of thought (Cruz et al., 2025), allowing us to explore participant perspectives in a high level of depth. Successfully hosting a workshop will determine the accuracy and authenticity of any insight that will be gained through the process. In our methodology we recommend hosting only **one storytelling workshop**, to allow for all data to be captured together, minimise the time commitment for participants, and enable event-like advertising that highlights one opportunity to participate. We also design the approach to be in-person. Many participatory approaches use online formats, to maximise coverage, however, digital approaches are vulnerable to sensationalism and bias due to online anonymity and the politicisation of social media (Çiçek, 2024).

Having completed the scoping phase, the details of the workshop and those who are invited to attend should be established. This allows the workshopping phase to focus on the content of the activities. We divide these into four steps held during the workshop: **setting the scene, building stories, visualising stories and reflective discussion**.

Setting the scene

The first step in the workshopping process is to **introduce to participants the intervention their participation will inform, the objective of the participatory process and the topic they will tell stories about**. The purpose of this first step is to sufficiently inform participants of why they are participating and why it is important. It is vital here that this is not done excessively, considering the level of moderation and instruction from facilitators. Too much moderation could diminish the fairness of the process (Perrault & Zhang, 2019) by influencing the type of stories that participants choose to tell. It could also inadvertently emphasise top-down dynamics, limiting the extent to which participants are able to feel a sense of ownership over the process and their contributions (Muchunguzi, 2023).

The first step should begin with an **introductory presentation of the intervention itself**, highlighting its purpose and the aspects in its design that the participatory process will be used to inform. This then allows for the objective of the participatory process to be presented, as well as the topic that should be explored in participant stories.

Explaining the topic should be done considering linguistic and literacy barriers, adapting to the cultural communicative norms of those present (Erdocia, 2023) and avoiding complicated jargon. Remember **storytelling is about what you understand not how much you understand**, we should prioritise personal experience and not topical literacy. It is also recommended to include interactive elements in the explanation of the topic, asking questions to participants about their histories and perspectives on the topic. This is to help participants prepare to tell stories about their experiences and start to approach any creative barriers. It can also serve as an early probing into the type of responses that the process may yield. Again, moderation is key here and discussions should not become too extensive so as to overly influence participants or reduce their creative capacities.

Building the stories

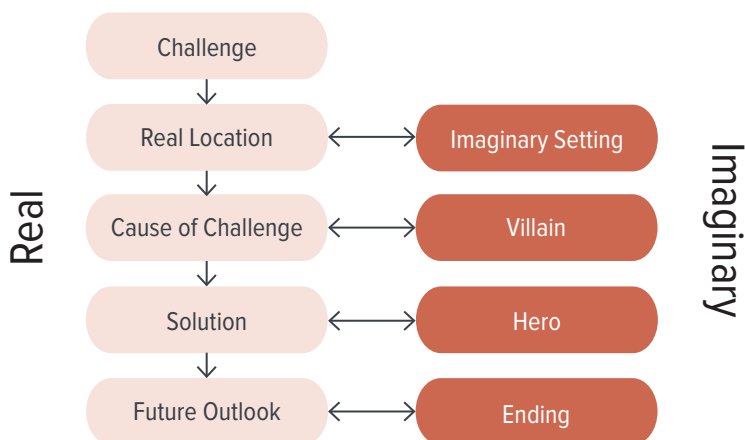
Once participants have been introduced to the topic, they can then be enabled to tell their stories following our **story building process**. This process is designed to be as straightforward and adaptable as possible. It avoids the generic approach of many participatory approaches that are not able to account for the diversity of participants (Muchunguzi, 2023) by allowing for a large level of freedom in what stories are about, how they are built and what imageries are drawn on. Crucially, **the story building process is completed individually**, allowing for positive feedback loops for each participant and maximise the sense of ownership of the stories told. This is designed to avoid any steering or biasing by implementers (Davies et al., 2022) or the influence of hidden inequalities that may be present in dialogue based approaches (Affre et al., 2024).

The process is conducted through text entries, to allow for stories to be built online or offline, depending on the levels of digital literacy in participant cohorts (Anzar et al., 2024) and to allow for the process to be easily translated to accommodate linguistic preferences (Erdocia, 2023).



Workshopping

The principle of the story building process is the reflection of real perspectives through imaginaries that reveal the thoughts and feelings of participants through the cognitive and affective domains of thought (Cruz et al., 2025). It starts with a particular challenge that a participant has faced related to the topic at hand. This serves as an entry point for participants to tell their stories and provides an anchor point around which to create content. Of course, every person has varying levels of creativity and some may struggle to create an entire imaginary story from scratch. That is why we break down the storytelling process into manageable chunks where the details of the challenge and the participant's idea of how to solve it are systematically addressed through the sequential stages in telling a story. The real location is reflected in an imaginary setting for the story. The cause of the challenge is made into a villain character. The solution the participant comes up with is turned into a hero and their outlook of the future after the solution becomes the ending of the imaginary story.



The story building process is designed to be as easy to follow as possible, however, in some cases participants may struggle to get started or come up with imaginaries. It is recommended that **an example is given for each stage in the process**, to help participants to ideate. We use our own online story building platform, where the process is clearly illustrated through a guided online form complete with helpful examples. Our platform also embeds visualisation software for the next step in the workshopping phase.

Do you want to use our platform? Get in touch to access our story building process for free and find out about our advisory, training and contracting services.



Visualising Stories

With participants having completed their stories in text, we have enough data to start our analysis and could stop the storytelling process here. To do so, however, would be to implement an extractive participatory process where participants are not provided enough of a feedback loop to feel their contributions are of value, leading to participatory frustration (Fernández-Martínez et al., 2020). We add a visualisation step to the workshopping phase to make the workshops more engaging and entertaining. In this step, participants can see their stories come to life. The imaginary stories told by participants can be visualised through a number of means, all of which can occur in real time. This provides a feedback loop for participants and reduces negative impacts caused by expectancy (De Vries et al., 2019).

The method of **visualisation should be selected based on the best fit with the cohort present in the workshop**, and considering the resource availability of the process. We include here three different methods: **AI-powered visualisation, live sketching by artists, and self-produced visualisation**. All methods rely on means of visualisation external to the facilitators, minimising over moderation and forced consensus (Perrault & Zhang, 2019) and potential power influences in dialogue (Affre et al., 2024).

AI-powered visualisation can be an effective and low cost way to produce audio-visual stories in real time. There are a number of platforms that exist where text descriptions can be turned into a series of images with voiceover narration. We have even produced our own platform that uses open source AI software to turn participant text entries into narrated stories, divided into chapters that correspond with the different stages in the story building process.



Want to use our platform? Get in touch for advisory, training and contracting services to help you with the visualisation step.

The benefit of using AI is that visualisations can be produced of every participant's story and fast enough to allow for subsequent discussion to occur immediately. However, there are also several drawbacks; the use of AI has many questionable associations for participants, image generation has a particularly high environmental impact, and visualisations may contain biases that do not properly represent participants (Duberry, 2022; Shin et al., 2024).

Workshopping

Another way to conduct the visualisation is by **employing artists to create live sketches of the stories told by participants**. This approach sustains the human creative element of the participatory process and also supports art-based participatory mechanisms (Rinne et al., 2024). Artists should be tasked to create basic sketches, so as to enable them to visualise as many stories as possible, and participants should be given the opportunity to request additions to the sketches produced. This ensures that the visualisation process remains dynamic and fast-paced. The benefits of this approach are that participants have more input on the content of visualisations and that human interaction is prioritised in the activity. The drawbacks of this approach are that it is rarely possible to visualise every story, the employment of artists is costly, and there is no audio component to accompany the visualisations.

The last way to visualise stories is to **enable participants to illustrate their stories themselves**. This can be done either with traditional materials; pen and paper and complete participant freedom, or using digital assisted drawing tools, where participant sketches are clarified with automated pre-designed illustrations. The benefits of this approach are that participants have complete control over the content of their visualisations, and that their drawings may add to the richness of data that reflects their thoughts and feelings. The drawbacks of this approach are that visualisations then rely on the drawing skills of participants, some participants may experience discomfort in being asked to make drawings, and there is no accompanying audio component.



Reflective Discussion

After visualisations have been produced of participant stories, the next step is to **enable a discussion where participants can reflect on the content of their stories and the visuals made**. This stage is important to support a collective sense of ownership over the story building process (Kiss et al., 2022). Reflective discussion reinforces the idea that “what I produced is mine”, and prompts participants into spaces where they must explain the intention in their creations. Discussions of this type also provide participants with the opportunity to clarify, correct or adjust how their identities are represented in their stories, addressing potential social barriers to participation in ensuring diverse voices are seen and heard (Pateman et al., 2021) and allowing for further reflection on particular socio-cultural needs and perspectives (Muchunguzi, 2023).

The general approach to these reflective discussions is to provide an **open and safe space for participants to explain and reflect on their stories**. This is best done by selecting particular stories to view as a group, and asking the creator to explain their choices, the metaphors contained in their mirroring of the real in the imaginary, and the accuracy of visualisations. This should be done on a voluntary basis to avoid participant discomfort.

Particular attention should be paid here to who is speaking a lot, and who is quieter, to try to minimise any dominance in dialogue (Affre et al., 2024). One way to do this is to scale back input from moderators, and lean into more informal discussion formats where participants self-organise the showcasing of their stories, e.g. in groups or by having storytellers to suggest the next person to speak. This can help participants to feel more comfortable sharing, by avoiding top-down dynamics caused by over-moderation (Muchunguzi, 2023).

The discussion step is the last part of the workshopping approach and allows for the workshop to be drawn to a close. It is important that at closure participants are thanked for their contributions, provided with any planned giveaways and that permission forms are distributed and signed, to make sure any further use or distribution of participant stories is permitted by those who have told the stories.



Want to know more about how to organise the workshopping phase? Get in touch for advisory, training and contracting services.

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Analysis

Analysis

After the storytelling workshop is complete, the analysis phase can begin. Here we deploy a combination of literary and sentiment analysis to explore the depth of participant perspectives on the topic at hand by **looking at the imageries and metaphors contained in their imaginary stories**. This is the phase in which the thoughts and feelings of participants contained in their stories are turned into detailed insights.

Our approach allows us to explore the emotive resonance of the participatory process without requiring participants to talk directly about their emotions. This allows for difficult topics to be addressed and avoids complex situations where participants may experience discomfort in sharing their emotional experiences (Liabo et al., 2024). By looking at the expression of real perspectives through imaginaries, we are also able to tap into subconscious associations that participants may not be able to verbalise (cognitive domain), but are able to represent through their selected imagery (affective domain).

The essence of the analysis process is the **identification of consensus across the imageries used in participants' imaginary stories**. We look at how participants represent the same real phenomena in their stories and then examine the sentiments contained in their imaginary representations. This process does not elevate any one voice over another, allowing for equal input regardless of how loudly someone may speak (Albert et al., 2021). It also is able to accommodate differences in cognitive, cultural and linguistic expression, which are often overlooked (Shortall et al., 2021), seeking out the sentiments in participant expressions, rather than the specific language that they choose to use. The analytical phase is divided into three steps: **storyline mapping, sentiment analysis and interpretation**.

Story mapping (cognitive dimension)

Story mapping is the first step in the analysis phase and uses a process of literary analysis to sort data from the workshops to allow for subsequent sentiment analysis. This step focuses on the cognitive dimension of participant responses, **sorting participant stories into groups by the real challenge that participants chose to tell their stories about and the real causes of the challenges they identify**. This allows the direct perspectives of participants to be understood and also enables the next step where sentiments are identified across stories that refer to the same issue and underlying cause (affective dimension). The story mapping step is best performed using qualitative data software.

Analysis

We use the programme ATLAS.ti (A. Gupta, 2024) due to its intuitive interface and capacity to code data using instructional inputs. Using ATLAS.ti we are able to summarise the entries of participants in the real parts of the story building process and simultaneously sort stories where the same challenges and causes of challenges are identified. This systematic approach ensures that no perspectives are missed, maximising transparency when participants view the final results (Fernández-Martínez et al., 2020).

Need help with mapping stories? Get in touch for advisory, training and contracting services for the analysis phase.

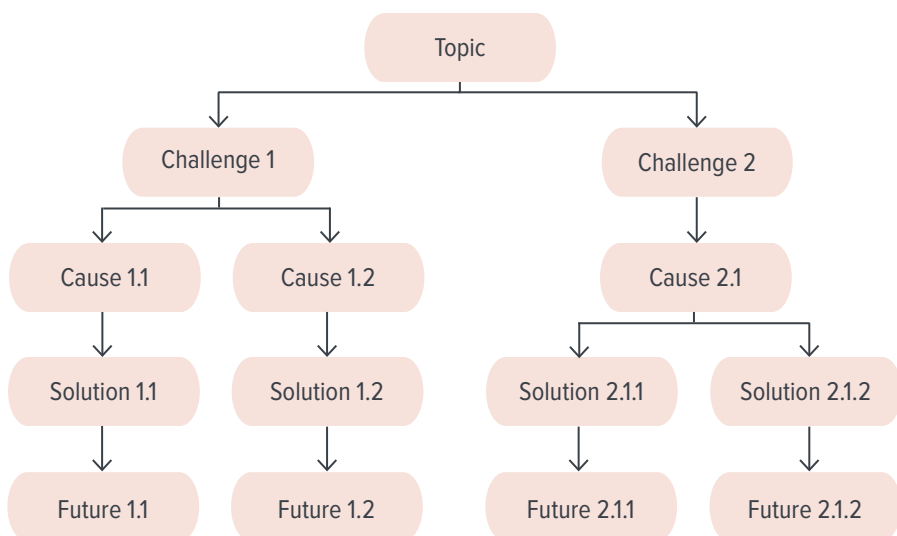


The step begins by **migrating all the data from the storytelling workshop into ATLAS**. This means copying every entry in the story building process into separate “documents”. When all the data is entered into the platform, we group the stories. We first inspect and record the challenges each story addresses and **separate stories into groups where the same challenge is addressed**.

Creating groups of stories requires us to **determine the degree of zoom where sufficient overlap is perceived in participant entries**. While it may seem that we must zoom out very far to be able to group challenges, the reality is that participatory processes often contain a large amount of repetition in the issues participants report (Ročak & Keinemans, 2023). This means groups can usually be formed with relative ease. It is also okay if only a few groups are found, as the depth of the analytical process will reveal many rich insights from the same group.

Once the groups have been made, we can **record the rest of the entries in the real part of participant stories** (cognitive dimension). In ATLAS.ti, we write a coding instruction for the software to identify the different solutions participants describe in the real solution part of the story building process. We then write an instruction for the software to identify the different features contained in participant descriptions of the real outcomes part of the story building process. We examine the results, group any overlapping aspects, remove anomalies and record the frequency with which they emerge. Using data management software allows for this analysis to be done quickly, across all stories simultaneously (A. Gupta, 2024).

The last task in the story mapping step is to **visualise the full picture of the cognitive dimension across the entire cohort**. This allows us to view insights together and provides a framework through which to conduct the subsequent sentiment analysis, so as to precisely define the affective dimension of participant perspectives. The mapping process uses a format similar to a vertically-oriented process flow diagram (tree diagram). It starts, at the top, with the overall topic. From this several arrows separate into the grouped challenges. Then, several arrows separate into the grouped causes of each challenge. From this, the different solutions to each challenge and the future outlooks are listed below each grouped challenge cause. The final diagram can be used as an explanatory product around which to centre recommendations. See below for an example of how this diagram may look.



Sentiment analysis (affective dimension)

After the story mapping, we conduct sentiment analysis, following the grouping of stories done previously. We do this within ATLAS.ti, using coding instructions to **isolate and identify the sentiments contained within participant entries**. We conduct analysis on entries in both the real and imaginary parts of the story building process, examining the language participants use to express real aspects and the metaphors they use in their imaginaries. Sentiment analysis of this type inherently involves some level of interpretation, either from the person conducting the analysis, or as a function of software being used, which may steer potential results (Davies et al., 2022). While this is difficult to avoid entirely, we minimise this by **breaking down entries in as many data points as possible**.

Analysis

Analysis is performed on individual phrasings within each entry in the story building process and then commonalities are counted across the whole cohort. So even if one interpretation does not accurately capture the intent of the participant, its overall contribution is minimal.

We **start the sentiment analysis with the descriptions of place**. Unlike other parts of the story building process, the descriptions of place are not aligned with a particular challenge or cause of challenge. Instead, they tell us about how the setting is viewed across the entire cohort. We start by analysing the real descriptions, instructing ATLAS.ti to identify the sentiments and features contained in the descriptions of the real place. This tells us their general feelings towards the place and the features they see as relevant to the topic at hand. We then analyse the imaginary descriptions of the story settings, again instructing ATLAS.ti to identify the sentiments and features contained in the descriptions. To make this actionable, we separate the imaginary descriptions into those positive and those negative. This is so that we can understand if the sentiments and features indicated are desirable or undesirable. We examine the resultant sentiments and features, group any that overlap and record the frequency with which they emerge.

We then conduct **sentiment analysis on the cause of the challenge participants have identified**. We do this by exploring the description of the villain that participants created to represent the cause of the challenge, their actions and the subsequent impact of their actions. We instruct ATLAS.ti to identify the sentiments in the description of the villain, the behaviours described in their actions, and the sentiments contained in the description of impact. This reveals indications about how participants feel about the underlying cause of the challenge, what kind of actors they associate with the cause of the challenge, what actions and behaviours they associate with the cause of challenge and how they feel as a result. We review the outcomes of the analysis, group any overlapping results, removing anomalies and record the frequency with which they emerge.

Next, we conduct **sentiment analysis on the solutions that participants indicate to their identified solutions**. We do this by analysing the imaginary hero figures participants have created to represent their solution. We instruct ATLAS.ti to identify the sentiments in the descriptions of the hero and the actions that the hero takes to defeat the villain. This indicates how participants feel about the nature of their chosen solution, where they may see its emergence, and what types of action they foresee as being able to address the challenge. We again review the outcomes of the analysis, grouping any overlapping results, removing anomalies and recording the frequency with which they emerge.

Lastly, we conduct **sentiment analysis on projected outcomes if the solution was applied** that participants reflect through the ending to their imaginary story. First, we instruct ATLAS.ti to identify the sentiments and features in the participants' descriptions. This tells us what participants desire for the future of their place and how they wish to feel in the future. Then, we instruct ATLAS.ti to analyse the sentiments in the descriptions of the endings to participants' imaginary stories. This tells us how participants wish to feel in the future, if their challenge is solved. As with all other data, we review the outcomes of the analysis, group any overlapping results, remove anomalies and record the frequency of each result.

Want to know more about how we conduct sentiment analysis and use our automated approach? Get in touch for advisory, training and contracting services.



Interpretation

The last step in the analysis phase is to interpret the outcomes of the literary and sentiment analysis. The essence of the interpretation step is to **combine insights from the cognitive and affective domains and contextualise these against the objectives of the workshop**, creating a synthesised impression of what participants think and feel about the topic at hand. This step is essential to produce outcomes that are relevant to the purpose of the participatory process, useful for the intervention and that do justice to the time and input provided by participants, to avoid participatory frustration (Fernández-Martínez et al., 2020).

We take a systematic approach to the interpretation step, examining the insights gained at each point in the story building process, and contextualising these against the details of the intervention. We start with the challenges that participants identified in their stories. We look at **if these challenges are addressed by the planned intervention** and if not, how they could be integrated into the intervention approach. This is essential to understand if the intervention will do justice to the main issues that citizens identify within the topic.

The next point of interpretation is oriented to the setting of the intervention. We examine the results of the sentiment analysis that indicate participant feelings towards the place and the features they see as relevant to the topic against the contextual explorations performed in the scoping phase. We **look at the scope of the intervention to understand which desirable aspects it works towards, and which undesirable aspects it should avoid**.

Analysis

Next, we look at the causes of the challenges participants indicate in their stories. We examine the causes identified in the story mapping and the results of the sentiment analysis that indicate how participants feel about the underlying cause of the challenge, what actions and behaviours they associate with the cause of challenge and how they feel as a result. We **explore whether these causes are addressed in the approach of the intervention**, or if they may be exacerbated with the current approach. This can indicate adjustments to the approach and communicative aspects that can be improved.

We then examine the solutions that participants indicate in their stories. We look at their ideas highlighted from the story mapping and the results of the sentiment analysis that indicate how participants feel about the nature of their chosen solution and what types of promising action they foresee. Looking at the planned intervention, we **examine if these solutions are included or considered**, and which outcomes of the analysis are relevant to include in recommendations. If solutions are not present or not relevant, we encourage communication as to why, and how the planned intervention takes an alternative approach.

Lastly, we interpret the results of the analysis with regards to the future outlook of participants on the topic at hand. We examine the outcomes listed in the story mapping against the insights from the sentiment analysis that indicate what participants desire for the future of their place and how they wish to feel in the future. We **examine the planned intervention to see if it aligns with participant visions for the future**. In doing so, we can produce recommendations for the intervention and how it should be communicated.

How exactly do we interpret results?
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Exploring each part of the analysis against the contextual factors, helps to develop a better understanding of the extent to which the planned intervention is likely to do justice to the challenges faced by citizens, and their ideas for how they could be addressed. This allows us to understand the main points of focus for the intervention and formulate recommendations. It is important here to consider the meaning of insights and recommendations for participants, going back to the details of the contextual exploration, to examine the potential depth of impact. This means exploring the historical and current impacts, to be able to express recommendations with the appropriate level of urgency.



Deployment

Deployment

The final phase in our methodology addresses the common issue of participatory processes that are deployed independent to decision-making procedures, and not sufficiently structurally integrated (Kurkela et al., 2024). Even when they are integrated, institutional resistance can be encountered limiting their capacity to result in actual changes to the design and implementation of interventions (Kurkela et al., 2024). This is often because insights are not sufficiently embedded within the process of the intervention; produced when the timing of the intervention no longer can accommodate change (Kern & Hooghe, 2018) and not expressed constructively where relevance, impact and quality are properly considered (Affre et al., 2024). In our methodology, we take an extended approach to formulating and disseminating the results of the process, considering how to make them contextually actionable and how to use them to create momentum in a range of sectors.

This process is governed by two factors: **visualising and communicating results in a range of different formats, and adjusting expressions to different audiences** that can take the insights further. Make recommendations speak the language of their intended audience is vital to be able to make impact. Particularly for involved communities it is important that they are able to view and understand the outcomes of the process, to minimise participatory frustration (Fernández-Martínez et al., 2020), do justice to the socio-cultural contributions provided through the process (Pateman et al., 2021) and absorb insights into the formation and valuing of community knowledge (Kiss et al., 2022).

Visualising and communicating results

In our methodology we produce a number of final outputs to express insights and recommendations through a range of media. This allows **different formats to be leveraged for different audiences, to maximise understandability and resultant impact.**

The first format we utilise are **data reports that contain all of the results and insights from the process.** These reports are structured according to the grouping of participant stories from the story mapping step of the analysis phase. Sections are made per group where the results of the story mapping are listed, and where graphs are produced to show the results of the sentiment analysis. These reports also contain interpretations of the data, to highlight aspects that are the most relevant to the intervention and display recommendations. The reports are technical in nature and serve to demonstrate the legitimacy of the recommendations produced, with a strong empirical background.

Based on the more detailed data reports, we also produce **briefs that synthesise and succinctly outline recommendations**. These are produced around a series of standalone one-pagers that contain key recommendations for different target audiences, divided by focal point of the intervention to be as actionable as possible. Longer form briefs are also made for each one-pager than contain more detailed information and scientific backing. The idea here is to **capture the attention of audiences with formats that are adapted to their temporal availability**. Briefs can also be adjusted in the language that they use, to adapt outputs to the linguistic familiarities of audiences.

The last format we deploy in our methodology is **visualisation**. First, we take the results of the story mapping and utilise the flow diagram, adding key recommendations and additional aspects from the sentiment analysis to succinctly illustrate the real thoughts and ideas of participants. We also produce **panel diagrams of the interpreted outcomes of each part of the story building process**: the challenges participants identify within the topic, the causes they identify of these challenges, the solutions they ideate to solve the challenges, and their desires for the future of their place. We use the results of the sentiment analysis mostly here, to produce **visualisations that express the emotive resonance of participant inputs**. Where possible, we engage local artists in the production of these panel diagrams, to utilise illustration styles that are familiar to participants.

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Tailoring recommendations to audience

With a number of formats produced to communicate the insights of the process to audiences, **dissemination plans can be designed that draw on different formats**, tailored to each audience. Of course most participatory processes have one main client, usually those organising or connected to the intervention. For this audience, all formats are relevant and should be used systematically to present recommendations in clear and understandable ways. Our methodology does not stop here, however, as we understand that **participatory processes should be embedded in wider stakeholder environments, to maximise the use of insights, ensure transparency and promote cross-sectoral action**.

Deployment

One of the most vital audiences are **institutional actors that are able to influence the design of policy and interventions**. They are best reached through clear and structured recommendations that use evidence-based policy language (Affre et al., 2024; Jäntti et al., 2023). For this reason, we mostly use briefs to reach this audience. We use both one-page and longer form briefs to allow for recommendations to adapt to the organisational routines of government officials (Jäntti et al., 2023). We also platform visual formats as means to ignite quick interest and highlight importance (Rüfenacht et al., 2021).

Practitioners are another key audience, able to leverage insights in their work and initiate further programs to continue research. This audience is found to be more open to longer form information than institutional actors, with a range of formats recommended to reach them (Delicado et al., 2022). Optimal communication strategies focus on training and replication and methodological transparency (Scher et al., 2023). As such, we prioritise longer form recommendation briefs and data reports to reach this target audience. Visualisations can also be used to provide quick avenues for practitioners to access research, but should be quickly followed with other written formats to sufficiently express recommendations.

Another key audience we target are **civil society organisations**. This is to make use of insights with actors that work directly with citizens. Civil society organisations are able to create social momentum around topics and promote collective action. Key approaches here include prioritising transparency and formulating narratives to promote empowerment and reflect community voices (Rüfenacht et al., 2021). We primarily use visualisations and one-pager briefs to reach this audience, however, data reports are always made available for full transparency.

The last and arguably most important audience to reach with insights are **citizens themselves**, particularly those who have participated in the process. This is essential to ensure a transparent process where the use of results is visible to communities (Fernández-Martínez et al., 2020). Strategies should prioritise the closing of feedback loops, where the use of participant inputs is highlighted and where recommendations are formulated to feed into social networks and public consultation spaces (Delicado et al., 2022). We mostly use visualisation to reach this audience, due to their accessibility and closeness to the data. Data reports and briefs are also shared.

Closing Remarks

This handbook serves as a **complete overview of our methodology of storytelling for participatory exchange**. We have designed the content to equip you with the theory and instruction to deploy our methodology in your context. Of course, we know every situation is different and that some aspects will need to be adjusted, which is why we have designed the approach to be as adaptable as possible.

With this methodology we seek to action a complete approach that addresses common pitfalls of participatory processes and that feeds into the design and implementation of interventions that impact residents. It has been developed over a number of years, through several applied research projects and draws on many collective learnings and experiences. We hope that it will be useful for your needs!

Stories matter. By telling stories we are able to understand each other better and design and implement interventions that work for the communities that they impact.

We have developed streamlined approaches for every part of this methodology. Do you want us to help you with your project? Get in touch for advisory, training and contracting services using the storytelling for participatory methodology.



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