Le Simplegadi ISSN 1824-5226

Vol. XXIV-No. 26 November 2026 DOI: 10.17456/SIMPLE-255

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The Search for New Stories to Live By: Econarrative and Ethical Leadership

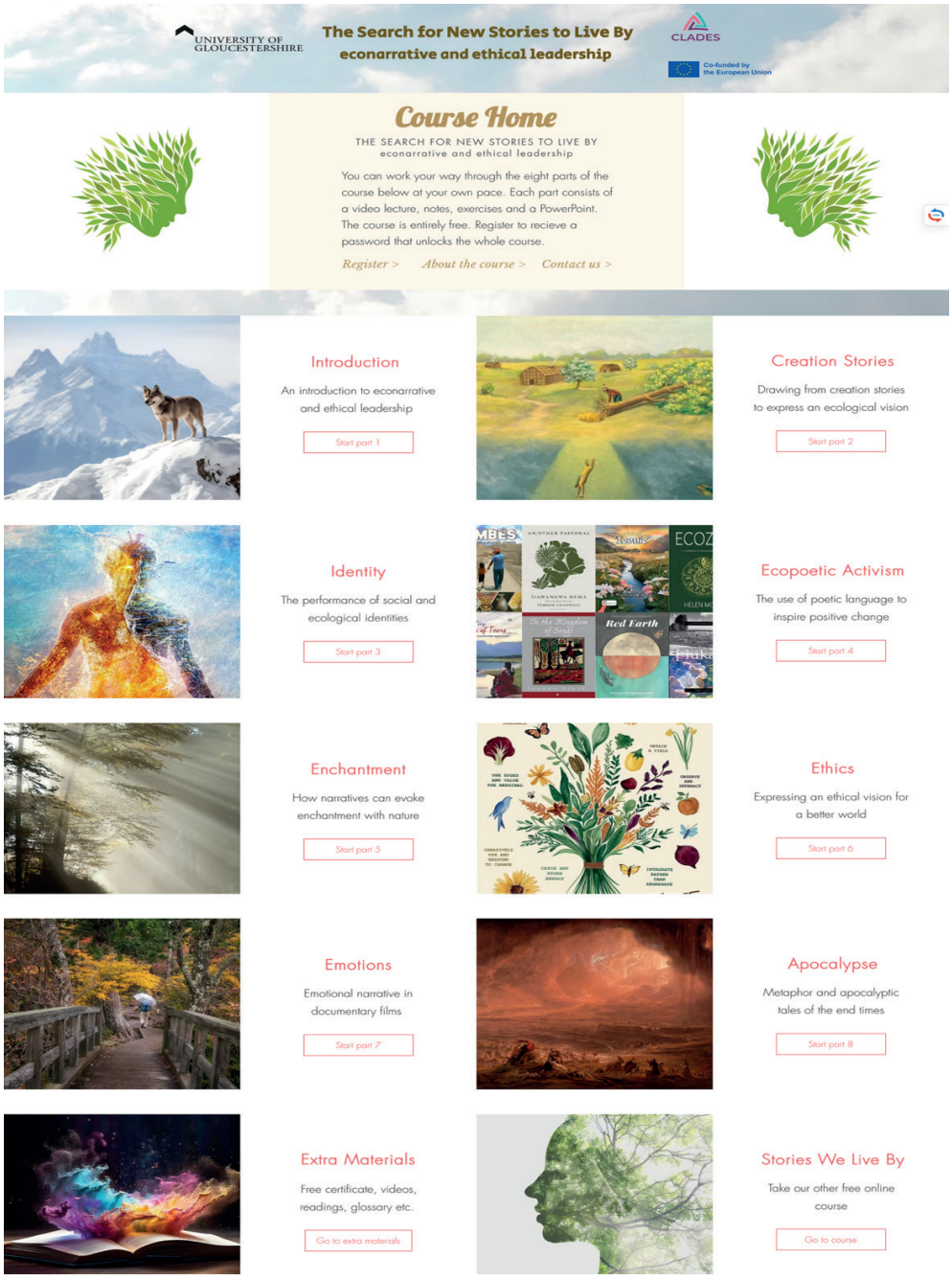


Figure 1. The course homepage at https://www.storiescourse.org/new (consulted on 22/07/2026).

What if the future of our societies depends on the stories we choose to live by? This question lies at the heart of the free online self-study course *The Search for New Stories to Live By. Econarrative and Ethical Leadership*, planned, created and coordinated by Arran Stibbe, Professor of Narrative Ecology at the University of Gloucestershire (UK), and based on his book *Econarrative: Ethics, Ecology, and the Search for New Narratives to Live By* (2024). To develop the course, Stibbe worked with a team of colleagues from the University of Gloucestershire (UK) and other international institutions as part of the CLADES (Critical Language Awareness, Democratic Engagement and Sustainability) project, funded by the European Commission under the Erasmus+ programme[1]. The course has also been adopted by the United Nations as part of its SDG:Learn programme[2] and follows on from the first free online course *The Stories We Live By*[3], based on Stibbe's book *Ecolinguistics. Language, Ecology, and the Stories We Live By* (2021).

In the first course *The Stories We Live By*, Stibbe explains that we live in societies based on stories, but some of the stories underlying contemporary highly industrialised and consumerist cultures perpetuate destructive beliefs for the earth and its communities, such as the belief in unlimited economic growth within a world of planetary boundaries, excessive consumerism that drives the exploitation of entire ecosystems, and human exceptionalism, which feeds a false illusion of ethical superiority and separation of humans from the rest of nature when in fact we are part of nature. These beliefs are constructed and conveyed through the language we speak, read, see, and hear as we live in and by our linguistic constructions of reality. Yet we rarely notice them, unless we promote critical awareness of how linguistic and multimodal meanings influence our perceptions of reality and are intertwined with ideologies, cultures, and power. If the first course is especially relevant to investigate the hegemonic stories we live by in consumerist and extractivist societies, in the second course *The Search for New Stories to Live By. Econarrative and ethical leadership*, Stibbe demonstrates that change and the construction of ecocivilisations founded on equity and socio-environmental and epistemic justice can only occur by finding and telling new stories to live by, that is, stories that imagine a fundamentally different society and practical steps to realising it. On this premise, the course analyses the language of a wide range of econarratives, namely narratives that involve "not only humans but also other species and the physical environment in interaction with each other" (Stibbe 2024: 6) to inspire meaningful change, guide us towards ethical leadership, and challenge our hypocognition, that is, the lack of "a cognitive or linguistic representation of a concept" (Wu & Dunning 2018: 25) that leads to a lack of realities we can conceive of. The course offers a constellation of non-anthropocentric, counter-hegemonic, decolonised, and culturally diverse econarratives, ranging from children's tales to documentaries, films, political speeches, books, poems, advertisements, economic texts, stories of Indigenous communities, Japanese poetry, and the speeches of leaders who embrace an ethical leadership grounded on ecological visions. This breadth makes the course relevant not only to those with literary or linguistic interests, but

[1] Project 2024-1-NL01-KA220-HED-000249129.

[2] See UN SDG:Learn (n.d.).

[3] See Stibbe (n.d). *The Stories We Live By*.

to anyone curious about how our world is fundamentally a *storied* world at all levels, where stories are found not just in literary works, but in the economic systems that structure a society, the objects we create and use, or the relationships between people and other beings. Stories shape and underlie every aspect of our reality for we are storytelling animals[4].

Three of the most significant, innovative, and empowering aspects developed in the course are the concepts of leadership, its ethical orientation, and the active search for and analysis of new stories to live by that can inspire people to build a society based on ecological values. In Stibbe's course, leadership becomes empowering and inspiring for it is not limited to individuals with broad social, political, or cultural influence. Instead, ethical leadership is woven into everyday life, where each of us can exercise it, whether through the personal choices we make, the examples we set in our families, or the roles we have in our communities. Moreover, the ethical orientation of the course demonstrates how language and stories model the ethical compass of a society, and tapping into this values-shaping force is key to building societies grounded in an ecological vision of reality that recognises ecosystems as the very foundation of life. The course stresses the importance of language in shaping the ecosophy of an individual or groups of people, that is, "a values system, grounded in evidence, which takes into consideration not only humans but other species and the physical environment" (Stibbe 2024: 19). The course is therefore suitable for anyone concerned about the future of societies in an era marked by interconnected socio-ecological crises and for people who are interested in understanding, learning, and/or teaching how change can happen through the stories we tell, including company employees, NGO workers, students and teachers. At the end of the course, it is also possible to request a free certificate of completion.

The platform of the course is very user-friendly and intuitive to navigate. The course unfolds through eight parts, each offering videos in English with subtitles in three other languages (Chinese, French, Spanish), exercises, multimodal presentations, readings, and further materials. Together, the eight parts show how stories and language can enact and influence our perceptions of the more-than-human world and how they can be drawn upon to bring about positive changes in society. The eight parts of the course seem to tell a story of their own, which begins with creation stories, that is, those narratives that give meaning, purpose, and sense to the origin of the world, and ends with the futures that await us. In between lie the many facets of our ecoreality, each influenced and constructed by the stories we tell through words, images, sounds, for communication is a multimodal, embodied experience, extending beyond logocentrism as "a property of animate Earth itself" (Abram 2010: 171). In addition to being structured like a story, the course integrates key elements of storytelling, such as narrative flow, aesthetic appeal, and emotional engagement. The combination of images, sounds, and clear and accessible language makes each video and learning material captivating, weaving together scientifically rigorous content with visual and emotional involvement. In this way, the course transforms factual knowledge into an engaging learning experience. The eight parts of the story-course are:

[4] See Gottschall (2012).

1. Introduction to Econarrative and Ethical Leadership
2. Creation stories
3. Identity
4. Ecopoetic Activism
5. Enchantment
6. Ethics
7. Emotions
8. Apocalypse

The course begins by introducing the concepts of econarratives and ethical leadership (Part 1) and follows with Part 2 devoted to Creation Stories, that is, stories used by different cultures to explain the origins of the world, humanity, and the universe. Part 2 reminds us that the stories we tell today often originated in a distant past. Just as there are anthropocentric creation stories, there are others in which the entire earthly community comes together to jointly create a world that is the shared home of all species, of every river, sea, ocean, tree, insect, plant. The course then turns to show how the identities we instantiate for ourselves and other beings in the world (Part 3) are deeply linguistic, discursive, storied, and, above all, profoundly consequential for the planet.

In Part 4, the language of poetry, long revered and now often overlooked in hegemonic technocratic societies, returns to wrap the planet in enchantment[5] and magic, demonstrating the pivotal role of language in shaping our perceptions of the lifescape[6] by enlivening or deanimating it. In Part 4, ecopoetry becomes a form of resistance against the language of technocratic rationality and quantification of nature, which reduces the natural world to a set of resources for extractivist models of economy. The course shows that the language of technoscientific and mechanistic rationality is but one of the many human symbolic constructions of reality used to make sense of it and communicate it. Additionally, it is the language of specific cultural worldviews and reality-constructions, which may not be fully inclusive and intelligible to everyone, and may fail to make people aware of the natural world as a life-sustaining system. Part 4, together with other sections of the course, demonstrates the distinctions between linguistic forms that are more "abstract" and rationalised, and others that are more sensorial and embodied, and how these impact on our perceptions of the environment. Part 5 contributes to re-enchanting the natural world by showcasing how econarratives and language can inspire a sense of wonder towards the planet as "those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts" (Carson 1965: 56).

As already mentioned, stories and language also hold a values-shaping force. Part 6 of the course is specifically devoted to how econarratives shape ethics and values, which are essential to foster a leadership capable of guiding individuals and communities towards a hopeful future. The "Emotions" section (Part 7) illustrates how econarratives can shape *how*

[5] For an examination on the connection between language, enchantment, and the more-than-human world, see Russo (2026).

[6] See Bortoluzzi & Zurru (2024).

and *what* our bodies feel by constructing causes and consequences of ecological issues, (re) distributing agency, and imagining the futures we can actively build. Since evoking emotions can work as a call to action, the course demonstrates the power of narratives in eliciting a wide range of ecological emotions, such as ecoanxiety, ecohope, ecoguilt, ecoanger, ecoenchantment, ecowonder, moving us from the 'catastrosphere' towards the sphere of hopeful and active engagement underpinned by new inspiring stories and emotions to live by.

Finally, Part 8 of the course, named "Apocalypse", reminds us of how challenging it is to communicate the planet's future as that future also depends on what we are able to imagine, and imagination itself is shaped by the stories a society tells. The future, in the end, is an open conceptual and narrative dimension onto which we project data, hopes, fears, plans, and predictions based on the information and feelings we hold. Part 8 therefore asks what kind of future we are able to imagine and tell, drawing on apocalyptic imagery that ranges from religious to secular ways of expressing the trajectories of our societies. It also reveals how we use language to communicate those trajectories, especially through metaphors and narratives. The course further demonstrates that we often rely on stories that follow a precise structure, namely the five stages of narrative identified by Todorov: equilibrium, degeneration, recognition, improvement, and restoration. By employing specific linguistic features, future narratives can overcome the paralysing fear sparked by "doom and gloom" stories and instead inspire action towards a new flourishing ecocivilisation.

The eight parts of the course share a common thread: they all offer sustainable ways of conceptualising, communicating, and inhabiting the earth on which the biodiversity of life emerges. They do so with rigorous critical grounding in scientific research across language science, ecology, sociology, economics, cultural studies, and other disciplines. But scientific facts are still stories and need stories to carry them forward, for if one wonders how "a new system comes to replace an entrenched one" (Kimmerer 2024: 97), the course offers its answer: through the search for new and inspiring stories to live by.

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