

ACTIVITY: STORY CIRCLES

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A Story Circle is a group of people sitting in a circle, telling personal stories, led by a Story Circle facilitator. Each Story Circle is different according to its purpose.

What is and is not a story?

- A story is a narrative of events drawn from the teller's personal experience.
- A story can be fashioned from a memory, a dream, a reflection, a moment in time, and more.
- A story typically has a beginning, middle, and end, as well as characters and atmosphere.
- A story is not a lecture, an argument, a debate, or an intellectualization, although these elements may be part of a story.

Story Circles should:

- Be preceded by an informal time to socialize. (For example, a pot luck dinner.)
- Take place in a quiet space with good acoustics where interruptions are unlikely to occur.
- Consist of 5 to 15 people sitting in a circle without notepads, pocketbooks, etc., and in such a manner that each participant has a good view of every other participant.
- Have one trained facilitator who begins, oversees, and ends the Circle.
- Have a stated time period in which the Story Circle will take place.
- Have a purpose articulated by the leader and agreed to by the participants.
- Allow for silences between stories.
- Be as much about listening as about telling.

Story Circles should not:

- Primarily serve the agenda of any one participant.
- Give importance to one story, or one type of story, over another.

The facilitator's role:

- Be clear about the purpose of the particular circle. (Examples: reinforcement of cultural identity; examination of issues of race and class; identification of community concerns; introduction of a community storytelling project; and so on.)
- Know, or determine with the group, the theme for the particular circle. The theme must complement the story circle's purpose. For example, if the purpose is to explore cultural identity, a circle theme could be family holiday traditions. If the purpose is to better understand race and class, the theme of the circle might be a story about a moment when one realized that one was different.

- Introduce him or herself, describe the circle's purpose and theme, and state the time the Story Circle will end.
- Tell the rules of the Story Circle and answer participants' questions about them.
- Emphasize the idea that listening to the stories of others is as important as telling your own, noting that deep listening can engender a meditative quality in the circle.
- Discourage participants from thinking too much about what they will say when it is their turn, asking them to trust that their story will come from their listening to the stories of the others.
- Tell the group how long the circle will last, and ask participants to pace the length of their stories to the time available, taking into consideration the number of participants. For example, if there are 12 people in the Circle and 60 minutes for storytelling, each story should be approximately 5 minutes in length.
- Announce the manner in which the facilitator will politely indicate to a teller that he or she has passed the time limit and needs to wrap-up the story.
- Ask the participants to quickly name the typical elements of a story – narrative, plot, characters, atmosphere, etc.
- Begin the circle with a story that sets the tone for the purpose and theme of the circle, or state the theme and ask who in the circle would like to tell the first story.
- After the first story, go around the circle clockwise or counterclockwise, with each person telling or passing when it is their turn. The rotation continues until everyone has told a story.
- Reserve time after the telling for participants to reflect on what has just transpired by asking everyone for their observations and comments.
- When possible, end with a group song or poem (perhaps taught and led by a participant) that brings closure to the spirit of the particular Story Circle.
- End the Story Circle on time.
- Participants often want to talk personally to each other after the Circle breaks up, so the facilitator should ensure space is available for this purpose.

Story Circle rules:

- There is only one Story Circle facilitator.
- There are no observers – only participants.
 - The Story Circle facilitator is also a participant, and must tell his or her story as well.
- Participants speak only when it is their turn.
 - The order of telling is either clockwise or counterclockwise from the first teller.
- When it comes to one's turn, the person decides the timing of when to speak, and may

decide to pass, knowing their turn will come around again.

- After everyone in the Circle has had the opportunity to speak or pass, the rotation begins again for those who have passed.
- Listening deeply is the most important part of the Story Circle experience.
 - Participants should not distract themselves by thinking ahead about what story they will tell. Rather, participants should listen to the stories told, and, when it is their turn, tell a story brought to mind by the previous stories, or pass.
- Participants and the facilitator never argue with or debate another participant's story.
- Participants and the facilitator never comment upon another participant's story other than to say, when it is their turn, "That story reminds me of . . ."
- There is no cross-talk in a Story Circle and all responses to a particular story wait their turn and are in story form.
- Story Circles are never tape recorded or videotaped without the participants' expressed permission.
 - If the stories in a Circle might be used to inform the development of a new play, all participants must understand this and give their permission.

When a Story Circle should be stopped by the facilitator: It is not unusual for painful stories to emerge in a Story Circle. The facilitator must exercise judgment about when to continue a Story Circle and when to stop it. Story Circle facilitators should not try to serve as therapists, social workers, or doctors (even if these are their professional occupations), because participants did not come to the circle to receive these services. The facilitator can:

- Call for a break and talk individually with the distressed person.
- Refer the distressed person to the proper professional.
- Resume or reschedule the Story Circle.