

Story Circles: A powerful engagement technique

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“You can’t argue with someone’s experience. You may not like what you hear but you can’t disagree with someone’s personal truth. Stories demand respect in a way that arguments never can. The story circle teaches us many important values such as listening, respect, and empathy that are necessary in democratic process.” - McCrae (n.d, para 2)

INTRODUCTION

A story circle is a highly structured engagement technique that comes out of the field of cultural community development. Story circles involve a group of people who each share a personal experience based on a specific storytelling prompt, with no conversation allowed until the debriefing and analysis stage at the end (“cross-talk”). This method reduces power dynamics by allowing everyone to have an equal voice. It promotes deep listening and productive conversation about thorny organizational and social issues by starting with people’s personal stories, rather than their opinions. It also results in a powerful bonding experience, encouraging shared meaning-making and collective development.

It can be difficult to appreciate the versatility and power of the story circle methodology without hands-on experience, so this publication begins with three concrete examples. The first example is a story circle process that was designed and facilitated by one of my students after learning the technique in a Community & Leadership Development class at UK. The second example comes from my Extension work in Kentucky. The third example draws from a community project led by Roadside Theater who, in conjunction with Junebug Productions, popularized the story circle method. Feel free to skip right to the facilitation instructions if you are already convinced of the power of story circles!

SCENE 1: A PLANNING RETREAT IN LEXINGTON, KENTUCKY, 2020

A sea of UK sorority sisters gathers for their annual retreat, jammed into a poorly-lit conference room on a too-early Saturday morning. Some are scrolling mindlessly on their phones, while others attempt awkward small talk as they wait. No one wants to be here after the last planning retreat dragged on and on without participation and ended in a screaming match between two sisters.

“Are you ready for something different?” A bright-eyed facilitator in a perky pink dress directs the women to sit in three small circles. As they find their seats, Susan explains that everyone will be invited to share a personal story as part of the story circle process. A hush comes over the room. “But I’m not a good storyteller,” one girl laughs self-consciously. “That’s ok, no pressure! You are welcome to pass,” Susan replies. “This isn’t about good storytelling. Just try to stay open to the process and see what happens.” She smiles reassuringly and explains the rules.

In each circle, one girl takes the plunge and launches into a story in response to the prompt: “Tell me a story about a high point with this sorority, a particular moment when everything went really well.” When she finishes, the girl sitting next to her begins. The group responds quickly, smiling in unison as people lean into these joyful (and sometimes hilarious) anecdotes.

The tension fades. The second round is harder, asking participants to dig deep: “Tell me about a low point with this sorority, a moment when you felt let down. What happened and how did it make you feel?” The depth of the stories that follow is mesmerizing. Remarkably to some, absolutely everyone chooses to participate. There are no personal attacks.

In the “cross-talk” period that follows, the group calmly and respectfully discusses what they have learned from these stories. Participants are able to articulate common themes – areas where the sorority is really making a difference and places where improvements need to be made. The planning committee identifies three concrete action steps. The sorority sisters leave feeling much less alone.

SCENE 2: A VIRTUAL LEADERSHIP PROGRAM, 2021

A dozen Extension educators from UK and KSU listen with rapt attention in their little Zoom boxes. They are listening to one of their colleagues, a member of this first cohort of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Leadership Certificate. The young woman shares a story of her firsthand experience with interpersonal racism. She explains that she hates public speaking and seldom feels comfortable even turning on her video, but she has decided to give it a try and be vulnerable. She has no idea how much her story resonates with others in the room; a colleague starts to fidget as he blinks back a tear. Next up is an older Agent who talks about his childhood memories of being caught in the middle between schoolkids from town and those from the countryside – both of whom hated each other. One by one, everyone in this newly formed group chooses to share a deeply personal story in response to our prompt.

Later we unpack the story circle experience and what it means to us personally, and to our group. One woman reveals that she’s never heard these kinds of stories—and she realizes just how much she has to learn about DEI. We talk about how the work now feels personal and extremely urgent. Another participant shares, “It also feels

good just to be listened to without interruption.” In a world fraught with divisions, the story sharing process we went through together speaks to our deepest desire to be heard and to feel connected with others. It speaks to our common humanity. We leave feeling hopeful, curious about this instant sense of community and what it might mean to dedicate ourselves to this shared goal.

SCENE 3: AT “SEEDTIME ON THE CUMBERLAND” FESTIVAL IN WHITESBURG, KENTUCKY, 2017

A multi-generational crowd gathers to partake in a free community theater event on a warm summer day. It’s the premiere of “The Future of Letcher County,” a youth-led play that speaks to the county’s economic challenges. The play was created by weaving together personal stories gathered through story circles and interviews with residents of differing ages and backgrounds (Roadside Theater, 2017). As is typical for a Roadside Theater production, there is no curtain, and the performance space is arranged to dissolve the distance between actors and audience. Performers banter back and forth with each other, sharing memories of school consolidation, church, homophobia, the loss of mining jobs, connections to the mountains, vacant houses, prison jobs, pain pills, struggles over whether to stay or go, and so forth.

The second act involves a conversation directly with the audience about their own experiences recalled by the play. Using the story circle methodology, community members get to share and hear a variety of perspectives as they gain a more complex understanding of the problem at hand (Cocke, 2015). During the “cross-talk” period, this diverse crowd also gets an opportunity to strategize and brainstorm solutions to their County’s economic issues. It is a challenging, but powerful experience.

Note: Roadside’s website is a treasure trove of information and examples of how story circles have been used in different contexts (Roadside Theater, n.d.). To see a story circle in action, Emory University (2020) has posted a model video online. Roadside Theater (2014) has also recorded an in-person story circle that may be viewed on their website.



FACILITATING A STORY CIRCLE

Because stories are so powerful and can be used to dominate as well as empower, the process of facilitating a story circle requires *careful adherence to specific guidelines*, which must be clearly defined to the group. In other words, a story circle is not a free-for-all where people sit around swapping stories and telling jokes. This structured process also requires attention to constructing *just the right prompt* that unlocks an authentic and valuable story sharing experience; indeed, it is challenging to get people to tell stories rather than offer analysis if the prompt is not phrased correctly. The following step-by-step instructions lead you through the process. I include a list of tips and tricks for story prompt construction and facilitating virtual story circles as well. In the final section of this publication, I discuss the range of circumstances where story circles might be useful for Extension work.

BEFORE THE EVENT

1. Decide how many story circles to host. The ideal size is 6-12 people. For larger groups you will need to break people into smaller circles, each with its own facilitator.
2. Work hard to bring a diversity of perspectives and people into the story circle. Story circles work well for cross-generational groups and for those who come from different religious, class, gender, and racial backgrounds. Telling stories in a circle can be a radically equalizing force.
3. Decide who will facilitate the story circle(s). Note that facilitators do share a story — no one is an observer!
4. Carefully consider the purpose of the circle (examples: fostering group cohesion, reinforcing cultural identity, examining issues of race or class, identifying community concerns, entertainment, etc.)
5. Identify the theme for the circle (examples: experiences of inclusion/exclusion, holiday traditions, etc.)
6. Develop a good story-based prompt based on your knowledge of the group and the purpose and theme of the story circle. Make sure that the phrasing of the question encourages people to share a personal story rather than offer analysis. "Tell us a personal story about a time when.... What happened? How did you feel?" is often a good starting point. Effective prompts should be broad enough that participants can take their stories in several different directions. They should also be specific enough that participants immediately come up with some ideas. Facilitators should try out their prompts ahead of time with friends or colleagues and see if the question elicits the kind of story that feels right for the occasion/purpose.
7. Plan the Agenda carefully. You should generally budget 10-15 minutes of time to socialize and settle in (refreshments are always helpful). Then 10-15 minutes to explain the rules and ensure that all distractions have been addressed. Plan for 3-5 minutes per participant per story, including the facilitator. Make sure there is at least 30 minutes for "cross talk" after everyone has had a chance to share a story. Most story circle sessions are approximately two hours, but they can be done in 1.5 hours.
8. Make arrangements to secure a quiet, private room for each story circle. Chairs should ideally be arranged in a circle, with nothing in between people.

DURING THE EVENT

1. On the day of the story circle, reassure participants that the exercise is meant to be fun and participatory and that they don't need to be afraid since they have complete control over what they choose to share. (Note: do not underestimate the importance of reassuring people up front as many have performance anxiety and do not know what to expect; that said, it is very rare that everyone in the story circle does not end up sharing a story).
2. After everyone is seated in their chairs, the facilitator should introduce the purpose and topic of the story circle. Use the "Introduction to story circle" video provided by Breazeale (2021) to walk participants through the rules (or the facilitator can offer up the rules themselves). Note that setting up the process correctly is critical to the success of the story circle – do NOT skip this step). Key points to make:
 - A. What is a story circle? It is a highly structured process that involves a group of people who each share a personal experience based on a specific storytelling prompt, with no conversation allowed until the debriefing and analysis stage at the end.
 - B. History of story circles (it is important to honor its history and name our teachers!) – the method was born out of the Civil Rights Movement and the work of John O'Neal, co-founder of the Free Southern Theater (FST) and Junebug Productions. It was later refined and popularized by Roadside Theater in Central Appalachia.
 - C. Describe how the story circle will work: one person will start, 3-5 minutes to share a story (no timer—people naturally tell stories that last this long, so time should feel expansive), no talking/responding to stories, passing is acceptable and there is a second opportunity to tell a story after everyone has had their chance, move clockwise around the circle, trust the process and that a story will come to you if you listen, any type of story is fine—so long as it is a story!
 - D. What is a story (and what is *not* a story): a story is not a sermon, lecture, expression of opinions, or analysis—but rather a personal anecdote, an experience that happened to you. Something with a beginning, middle, and end. Story circles can hold space for all kinds of stories, including funny ones, tragic ones, and everything in between. You can tell a story from your childhood, your work life, your role as a parent – there are no limitations. Tips for how to bring others into your story: provide context and details; describe vivid details; share feelings; helpful to zero in on a challenge that you faced.
 - E. The role of the facilitator: to gently intervene if someone gets lost in their story and goes on too long; to stop the process and check in with participants if someone gets too emotional.
 - F. The importance of listening (and trying not to think about your own story). Eliminate distractions. Let the magic of listening deeply to other people's stories allow you to change what you share. In O'Neal's (n.d.) words, "In storytelling, listening is always more important than talking. If you're thinking about your story while someone else is telling theirs, you won't hear what they say. If you trust the circle, when it comes your turn to tell, a story will be there" (para. 10).
 - G. "Cross-talk" is the period for discussion afterwards. This is when people will share reflections on the process and discuss themes that emerged.
 - H. Story circles are confidential spaces. Leave the stories, take the lessons. Do not take notes or record unless everyone agrees and knows how the recording will be used (not recommended).

3. Provide the story prompt and give everyone a few minutes to consider it. Ask for a volunteer to tell the first story. The facilitator can start, but this is not desirable. It is preferable to wait in silence until someone is willing to start (the exception is if you want to set the tone for the level of vulnerability, in which case it might be useful for the facilitator to start). Pause between stories, acknowledge/thank the storyteller through your body language (nod), and proceed in a clockwise fashion. After completing the circle, return to the participants who passed on the first round to give them a second chance to contribute a story.
 - A. Can you identify some new passions or action items from the group conversation? What will you do next?
 - B. Check in with those who were particularly moved by the experience. Is there someone with a powerful story who might be willing to lead a new, related initiative with the support of the group? If so, can you assist with new leadership development?
 - C. Do participants want to do more story circles in the future? What topics would they like to discuss with this engagement technique? Where do they think this engagement method might be useful in their community?
 - D. Does anyone else want to be trained in facilitating story circles?
4. Shift to cross-talk after the story circle is complete. Facilitate discussion around the following questions:
 - A. What are some images you are left with from the stories? (Davis, 2019, p. 128)
 - B. What was that like to participate in this exercise? To listen in this way? To tell your story? How did you feel?
 - C. What themes did you notice across the stories?
 - D. What comes next? What should we do with what we have learned today?
5. Provide some sort of synthesizing or closing activity, which could be anything from a full group conversation to asking each group to develop a poem or brief skit about their group story (Davis, 2019, p. 128).

2. Provide an evaluation to your participants (see below for link to online evaluation).

ADAPTATION FOR VIRTUAL STORY CIRCLES

1. Carefully consider the various online meeting platforms and select one. I recommend Zoom because there is a grid view where you can see everyone at one time.
2. When inviting participants to a virtual story circle, tell them ahead of time and request that they find a quiet place to set up their computer where they will not be interrupted. They will need to have a working camera and mic, which should be tested at the start of the session.
3. At the beginning of the virtual session, remind people to put aside distractions and focus on listening, noting that their body language communicates whether they are succeeding in this effort (it can be very distracting if people are moving around in the video frame). Tell them how to set up the grid view in Zoom. Do a quick technology check.

AFTER THE EVENT

1. Story circles are more than just icebreakers, so facilitators should not immediately transition to the next thing. Instead, think about how best to put the conversation into action.



An online evaluation is available for use with this guide!
 URL: <https://tinyurl.com/yckkyb2j> or scan QR code at left.
 Email Nicole Breazeale (nbreazeale@uky.edu) for survey data.

4. To simulate a “circle,” you can paste a list of the participants in the chat and ask people to tell a story in that order. Or the facilitator can call on people in the order they show up on their screen. Make sure to keep track of the people who pass on the first round so you can return to them after everyone else has had a chance to share a story.
5. Use the “breakout” feature if you need to split people into smaller groups. Consider how best to coordinate a return to the “main room” for the cross-talk portion of the activity.

INTEGRATING STORY CIRCLES INTO EXTENSION PROGRAMMING

Story circles can be easily integrated into Extension programs, clubs, classes, coalitions, as well as used with Extension councils. For example, story circles were successfully integrated into the Kentucky ESP Leads program to foster deeper connection and conversation about “ethics” in Extension (prompt: Tell us a story about a time when you got tangled up in a thorny moral dilemma. What happened and what did you do?) As described in the introduction, story circles were used on the second day of the DEI Extension Leadership Certificate program (prompt: Tell us a story about an experience of exclusion or feeling ‘less than’ others around you based on the color of

your skin, how much money your family had, your gender or your sexuality, what religion you practiced, or in any other way. What happened? How did you respond? What was it like to have this sense of being set apart?) In these cases, the purpose of the story circle was to build group cohesion and identify some shared values, experiences, and concerns before continuing on with a challenging topic. The “leveling” nature of the process was also important given that people have varying degrees of status or privilege.

If the goal of the story circle is to inform a planning process or foster collective action, it is important for the facilitator to add additional time during the “cross-talk” component and to develop questions that help participants think through how to move from critical reflection to critical action. For example, “What have we learned from these stories about what we do well and where we may be falling short? How might we act on what we have learned today?” Extension councils might be a good place to try a story circle that jump starts participatory planning.

Extension also plays an important role in convening community stakeholders around social issues such as affordable housing, substance use disorders, and food insecurity. Story circles can be used as an engagement tool in partnership with local governments or journalists

POTENTIAL STORY CIRCLE PROMPTS

- Tell us a time about when you discovered someone was very different from the negative assumptions you first made about them.
- Tell us about a time when you realized you didn’t fit in.
- Tell us about an experience when you let go of anger or resentment.
- Tell us about a time when you let go of control – what happened? What was that like?
- Tell us about an experience of transformation when, out of a crisis or difficulty, you discovered a gift in your life.

Prompts adapted from Cole & Dedinsky’s (n.d.) packet of Restorative Justice Practices. *Please reach out to Nicole Breazeale (nbreazeale@uky.edu) if you want help developing just the right prompt for your situation.*

to carry the conversation deeper into the community. For example, the city of Sacramento was grappling with a housing crisis and Capital Public Radio collaborated with local partners to co-host a series of story circles and bring together diverse residents to talk about housing in an intimate setting (Capital Public Radio, n.d.). This would be a great opportunity for Extension to introduce a powerful new engagement technique into their communities and to help people hear one another and envision the way forward.

Finally, many practitioners find it helpful to integrate story circles as a regular part of convening a group. In this situation, one might begin with a light prompt (e.g., "Tell us a story about a time when you got away with something – or didn't! What happened?") and then move into prompts that require deeper vulnerability. As a group gets familiar with the story circle process, they may also suggest prompts that can be used. Note that facilitators should think carefully about how best to support a participant who is triggered by a story. They must also have a plan in place before opening a conversation about extremely painful or sensitive topics.

CONCLUSION

Story circles are a unique and powerful tool for Extension Agents to use in their trainings and programs. It is a new practice for Extension that breaks away from age-old approaches used in the past. That said, with an influx of new clientele, story circles can help us to engage and build trust with non-traditional audiences and to address the sensitive topics of the day in a moment of deep societal divisions.

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