

Story Circle Activity Guide¹

The Power of Stories

“The oral tradition is one of the most powerful and effective transmitters of culture in the history of humankind. At the center of most of the world’s cultures and religions is story. At one time stories lived in the memories and in the ritual telling of the people. They had both aesthetic and utilitarian dimensions. They enthralled and taught. Today, in most western European traditions, education is often concerned more with the accumulation and imparting of written “facts and figures” than with the search for meaning through story. Roadside Theater focuses on the oral tradition, not to replace or ignore the written word, but to search for its soul.” -Roadside Theater Story Circle Methodology

Story Circles

A Story Circle is a small group of people sitting in a circle, sharing stories or remembrances. You may want to host a story circle for a number of different reasons. A purpose may be as simple as getting to know one another or building bridges across common divides, or as complex as solving an organizational problem or gathering themes for a play or piece of public art. All story circles involve people sitting in a circle without the clutter of our busy human lives, such as phones, computers, desks, or paperwork. Just people sitting in a circle together telling and listening to each other’s stories, one at a time, without debate or argumentation. Yet it can be more radical than it sounds – in this society, and especially in academia, we seldom tell each other stories about our own lived experiences let alone listen to each other without judgement or argumentation.

What is a story?

- A story is a personal memory, a dream, a reflection, a moment in time.
- A story usually has a beginning, middle, and end, as well as characters and atmosphere.
- A story is first and foremost not a lecture, an argument, a debate, or an intellectualization, although these elements may be part of a story.
- A story is NOT an intellectual theory/argument/debate.
- Because stories are a sequence of events, memories, recollections, people, places, things, sights, smells, sounds, tastes – they BRING YOU to other people’s experiences.

¹ Adapted by Erica Kohl-Arenas based on Roadside Theater’s methodology and training by Appalshop staff. This method builds upon the work of John O’Neal of Free Southern Theater and longtime IA practice.

Story Circles should:

- Be preceded by a formal or informal time to socialize. (For example, after a performance, a potluck dinner, or a dessert reception.)
- Consist of from 5 to 15 people sitting in a circle without tables, phones, 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, moves along, 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, which can be an important way to honor a particular story.
- Be as much about listening as about telling.

Story Circles should not:

- Give importance to one story over another, or one type of story over another.
- Be tape-recorded or videotaped without the participants' permission.
- Primarily serve the agenda of any one participant.

The Story Circle facilitator should:

- Get the group in a symmetrical, equitable circle where participants can all see each other, knees almost touching.
- Know 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 and describe the circle's purpose and theme and the time the Story Circle will end.
- Describe the rules of the Story Circle and answer participants' questions about the rules.
- Emphasize the idea that listening to the stories of others is as important as telling your own.
- Discourage participants from thinking too much about what they will say when it is their turn. Spontaneity is important.
- Tell the group how long the circle will last so participants can pace the length of their stories to the time available, taking into consideration the number of participants.
- Begin the circle with a story that sets the proper 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.



- Go around the circle clockwise or counterclockwise, with each person telling or passing when it is their turn.
- Before ending the Story Circle, ask if people who have passed would now like to speak.
- End on time.
- Reflect on what has happened at the end of the Story Circle by asking for comments from participants.
- When possible, end with a poem or song (perhaps led by a participant) that brings closure to the spirit of the particular Story Circle.
- Leave time for participants to talk informally to each other when the Story Circle is over.

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.
- When it is his or her turn, the participant decides the timing of when to speak and may decide to pass.
- Listening for the soul of the living word is the most important part of the Story Circle!!!
- Participants should not distract themselves by thinking ahead about what story they will tell when it is their turn.
- 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 nor 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.

When a Story Circle should be stopped by the facilitator:

- Sometimes, difficult and painful stories 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 occupations in their professional lives – because participants did not come to the circle to receive these services.
- The facilitator can consider calling for a break, talking individually with the distressed person, referring the distressed person to the proper professional, or rescheduling the Story Circle.

