



Optional Activity: Story Circles

The *Skills for Bridging the Gap* curriculum consists of four, sequential modules: “Why Build Bridges?,” “Listening,” “Sharing Your Story,” and “Approaching Tension Constructively”. The following “Story Circles” activity is offered as an optional learning experience to accompany this core curriculum.

We recommend that this Story Circles activity be used after learners have completed all four modules of the curriculum. They will get the most out of the experience with the practice of the full curriculum behind them. That said, it could also be used between Modules 3 and 4.

Time: Varies

Format: Synchronous – In person or Online

Supplemental Materials: None

Pework for the Facilitator

- Read *Habits of Effective Bridge Builders*
- Decide on a prompt for the story sharing, either independently or together with the group of learners who will participate in the Story Circle

OVERVIEW

A Story Circle is a way to facilitate a gathering of people to share and witness each other’s stories. This methodology is powerful, simple, and highly flexible for inviting a group into closer connection with one another, exploring a theme, or finding the commonalities and distinctions in group members’ narratives and lived experiences. This particular practice comes from the lineage of [The Highlander Center](#) and was widely used as an educational tool throughout the U.S. Civil Rights movement.

GUIDANCE

Set Up

In advance of the session, the facilitator should decide on a prompt (or a few options for prompts) to begin the Story Circle. (See below for more information regarding the prompt.) The facilitator may also choose to make this decision together with the group of folks who will participate. If you have time before the activity, and it is helpful to do so, you can share the initial prompt with participants to give them time to think about their story.

Once gathered together, the facilitator starts by sharing the exercise instructions with participants and answering any questions about the process.

Next, we recommend that the facilitator check in with learners to ensure everyone is comfortable with the process, making adjustments to the plan as the group might find necessary.

Story Prompt

Story Circles begin with a prompt that invites people to share a personal story about something that has



happened in their own life. It is not an anecdote about a topic or about an ideology, disconnected from the person's lived experience. It is not something the person heard about someone else – unless it directly impacts the teller. We encourage people to trust the deepest story that comes up from them. If nothing comes up initially, people almost always find that a story of their own arises as they listen to others' stories.

Defined Time Without Interruption

Each person in the circle is given the same amount of time to share without interruption or comment by anyone else in the circle. The facilitator tracks time and offers an audible signal to indicate when time is up for each person to ensure equitable space for everyone. Usually, the time offered is 2-3 minutes and no more than 5 minutes depending on the size of the circle and time available.

Rounds & Passing

Anyone can start. Often this means that the facilitator states the prompt, and the group waits in silence until the first story arises. Following the first story, the next person in the circle can either share their story or pass. When someone passes, it moves to the next person in sequence. Anyone who passed will get the chance to share after everyone has spoken in the first go-around.

Cross-Talk

Once everyone in the circle has had the opportunity to share (including the facilitator), the circle is open for cross-talk. This is when the group begins to process together what they've learned or gained from what's been shared. This can be a time of identifying themes, reflecting on one another's stories, or asking questions – all within the consent of the group.

Active Listening & Confidentiality

It's critical to the integrity of the circle that everyone agrees to keep the stories and conversation of the circle confidential. If there is share-back or intention to use the content of the circle for a larger purpose, then the group should agree together on what's okay to share beyond the circle.

During the circle and cross-talk, group members should endeavor to practice their best listening. It's helpful to remind people that a natural tendency is to be thinking about our own stories, rather than listening fully to what's being said by the speaker. There is the temptation to rehearse and prepare. Share with learners that the real power of story circles emerges when we set aside these temptations and fully listen. Generally, when we trust that the right story for us to tell will emerge when needed (and sound just fine), we share our best stories with the group.

Reflection

The following can be posed to the group for individual, paired, or whole-group reflection after completing a round of story sharing.

- What's standing out to you from today's story circle?
- How did it feel to share your story?
- What was challenging or surprising about this process?
- What did others share that feels particularly meaningful or valuable?