

Story Circle Discussion Paper

You probably can't tell by reading this but I grew up in Southern Illinois--very Southern--but I speak with a somewhat artificial "Middle American accent" that I acquired because my parents, (mainly my Dad), made me listen to the radio, (Mutual Broadcasting Network, thank you very much!), to learn how to talk. I guess he figured that "if 'They' can't tell that you're a Negro when you call on the phone 'They'll' have to get the nerve to tell you, 'No!' to your face."

Nonetheless, I grew up knowing that I didn't talk like everybody else did. Sometimes other kids would tease me about it as I grew up, but it was good spirited and it didn't bother me very much until I finished college in 1962 after deciding to go South to work in the Civil Rights Movement. To tell the truth, I was worried about the fact that I was taking my life into my own hands by getting involved in the "nonviolent Movement" but one of my biggest fears was that the rural black people with whom I expected to work, would be put off by my language.

I couldn't have been more wrong. Surely people paid attention to how I spoke, but the main thing that they listened to was how I felt to them. If they perceived that I was honest and sincere in my interest in and commitment to our common struggle, then everything was going to be all right. The same is true in the story circle, art is just a reflection of life.

I hesitate to present these suggestions for the operation of the Story Circle process in writing because the process, like the stories that people use it to share, is essentially oral in nature. When things are written down we have a tendency to treat them as more final than they need to be. On the other hand, when people sit down to actually talk together we have the chance to look at the body language, listen to the tone of voice, to question if you're not clear about something or to challenge if you think that's in order.

We even use different words when we write, maybe even a whole different kind of language. I even think differently when I'm writing than when I'm talking. If you, dear reader, were sitting here I wouldn't be bent into the computer keyboard staring at the screen typing or editing what I've already written. I would be engaged with you, concerned about how you react to what I say, changing my direction or my emphasis according to your responses. We could move more easily between thoughts. On the other hand, when I'm writing I can re-write and edit and you'll never know it . . . well, maybe you'll never know it . . . unless I tell you.

In fact, our present connection is much more abstract. I don't know who you are, where you are, what the circumstances are as you read this . . . all that kind of stuff is really important if you're trying to communicate with someone. It's impossible for me to guess what brings us together and separates us. If you were really here I wouldn't have to imagine as much about who you are and could pay more attention to what you want or maybe need from me in order to understand what

I'm trying to communicate and how I feel about it. So, in this case at least, writing is a poor substitute for being there.

Jack Jackson, the stalwart founder of the Inner City Cultural Center of Los Angeles, (whose training incidentally was in the sciences), says that one of the main problems of our "scientific era" is that we've overdosed on "analysis, taking things apart . . . I'm interested in finding out how to put things together." When we tell stories we are sharing with each other how we put things together. When we share stories we share whole parts of ourselves. Stories come charged with the spirit of the teller and have lives of their own.

At Junebug productions we have found that it good work in teams of two whenever possible--a facilitator to set up the circle and coordinate things, a monitor to support and watch for possible problems. Choreographer, dancer, teacher, Liz Lerman of the Dance Exchange identifies the monitor is the one who is empowered to change the vibe in the room. However the responsibilities have been divided, it's important that these functions be identified for the group. Let there be no mystery about the process.

My grandfather had a bunch of good advice, not necessarily about story circles but I don't think he'd be offended if I appropriate some of his ideas that can apply to the story circle process. One thing he told me that comes to mind here is, "Better to have a few easy rules that you can follow than to have a bunch of hard rules that you get lost in." Don't make too many rules. Rules only work if people agree to them. That's why it's better to keep them simple. Some groups take more rules than others, it depends on who you're working with and why. I mean, you might need a few more rules when you're working with a group of schoolteachers trying to develop a secondary school curriculum than you might need if you're trying to teach fractions to a group of third graders. But as a general rule you might say that less is more. Make as few rules as possible and no laws.

Well, maybe there is one law, the law of listening. In story telling, 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. Sometimes you may be tempted to think of it as magic. If you don't have a story when your turn comes or you're not ready to share the story that comes to you, (which is more likely), it's all right, you don't have to tell. You can pass. After the first round there's usually enough time for those who passed to tell if they wish to. Another rule about listening is that you don't have to like the story that someone else tells but you do have to respect their right to tell it.

Some people are surprised with the suggestion that stories can be used to teach math or science. My old friend Bob Moses, who organized The Algebra Project, (which specializes in teaching algebra to dis-privileged youth), points out that people learn better if you find the lessons you're

trying to teach in stories that people in the group tell. Anybody can learn anything better when the subject matter is based on stories that come from or affirm your own experience and purposes. In fact the story circle is just a way of focusing communication. It can be used for any purpose that a group of people wish to pursue.

Make sure everyone is comfortable, has some time to greet and meet informally; get a feel for the particular mood of the group that day. I think it's always good to have refreshments on hand. At the appropriate time, convene the circle. The convener needs to make a clear concise statement of the reason for calling the circle. Everyone needs to know what you're trying to do and have the chance to buy in.

If they already know each other, then each person should simply take a moment to describe how they feel about the purpose and what they'd like to accomplish. If the people in the group aren't already familiar with each other, they should introduce themselves. Now this is where I usually introduce a procedure that helps things to move along smoothly, especially if it's a new group. Without making a big thing of it, I usually start the circle by introducing myself and then begin the process by looking to the person on my left to go next. This gets the group to thinking in terms of taking turns moving around the circle. Setting it up this way saves time--none of that business about who's going to talk next. It also helps the less aggressive people in the group to have a fair chance to speak.

I think it's important to talk about the circle itself. I usually say something about how democratic the circle itself is. Everybody on the circle is equal. Everyone on the circle should always be able to see everyone else. If you can't see everybody else on the circle you need to make an adjustment. If others join the circle then the group has to adjust.

It's also important to point out that being democratic does not mean without leadership. The leader or convener of the circle has to get things started and monitor the progress of the story circle to make sure that everyone stays aware of what the rules are, but remember that discipline is always voluntary. You can't make anyone do anything they really don't want to do. Try it and you're likely to have an insurrection. The leader's job in the face of insurrection is to try to make it clear what the choices are and get out of the way. Sometimes the insurrectionists will be right and you'll learn something from them. If, in due course, you still think they're wrong, say so and why, re-state the options as you see them and do what you have to do. You can request discipline in a group but you cannot effectively force them to do anything they really don't want to do and I for one don't think you should. I can hear my Grandfather now, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink!"

Most people already know most of what they need to know to do what they have to do already. What they don't know they have to create out of reflection and the critical evaluation of their own experience. As my grandfather used to say, "Anything I can give you, I can take away."

Time. It's really important to be conscious of time. It usually works pretty well if everyone in the group shares the responsibility for keeping track of time. The way I do this is by getting the group to help make the agenda. I ask how much time we want to take for the session. I think that about three hours is the max a group ought to plan on and about an hour is the minimum. Large groups should be divided into groups of 5-6 persons each. Allow about 3-5 minutes for each person to tell a story and then about 3 minutes per person to sum-up at the end of the session. This summing up I think is really important. It provides people time to digest what they've learned or thought about as a result of the stories that have been told. There also needs to be another period of time, roughly about equal to the summary, for people to have cross conversation about the issues that come up and to plan what they want to do about it. There should always be some kind of follow-up activity.

Now to review:

1. Like the stories it aims to collect, the Story Circle process is essentially oral in nature so it's not easy to communicate in writing.
2. Everyone needs to know the purpose of the Story Circle and have the chance to buy in . . . or out. Maybe they can do this as they introduce themselves and describe what they'd like to accomplish in this particular story circle.
3. Don't make too many rules. Less is more.
4. Listening is more important than talking. You mustn't be thinking about what you will say while someone else is talking. Trust the circle to bring your story to you. You don't have to like other people's stories but you must respect their right to tell it.
5. You don't have to tell a story. If you have no story to tell when your turn comes, just pass, you'll get another chance before a second round.
6. It saves time in the beginning if you take turns moving clockwise around the circle.
7. Don't get in power struggles with people on the circle, discipline is always voluntary. You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink!
8. Let everyone in the group share responsibility for keeping track of time.

9. Provide time for sum-up at the end of each session.
10. Leave time for people to digest and have cross conversation.
11. Make some kind of follow-up activity that's viable for the particular group.

For Junebug Productions, the story circle has emerged as a key instrument for doing our work. We recommend storytelling and the story circle process as tools for a wide range of purposes that rely on deep communication and exchange. Frequently we are asked for written material about the process. This discussion paper is for people who want a written reminder of the process and how it can work. After you've run three or four story circles on your own I'd appreciate it if you'd send stories or suggestions of things that help you understand or think about the process better. Others will certainly benefit from the lessons of your experience.

(by John O'Neal)