Gathering - How to Host a Story Circle

The Welcome:
Plan how you will transition people into the gathering:

- Greet participants as they arrive and invite them into the space, ensuring that all feel welcome.

  For an in-person event:
  - Arrange participants in an equal circle ensuring that there are no physical barriers, like tables, in the middle.

  For a virtual event:
  - Instruct participants to use gallery view so that everyone is seen at the same time and the same size.

- Once everyone has arrived, invite participants to introduce themselves. You may ask them each to share what attracted them to participate.

Opening the circle:
Set the tone:

The story circle is designed to be a supportive space for giving and receiving, for learning from one another so that we may shape a shared understanding of the rich complexities that exist within our community. Be fully present in this space, whether you are sharing your story or listening to the stories of others. To listen deeply is a generous and generative act that builds trust and opens possibilities for creating connection. The goal is for all participants to be heard and feel heard. Model this by maintaining focus on the storyteller, rather than thinking ahead to the details of your own story. This will open possibilities for rich, organic intersections between stories.

Set the rules:
Read this section to your participants or otherwise guide them with the purpose, direction, and ground rules.

- Stories will be based on a prompt or question provided by the host at the start of the story circle. The expectation is that stories are unrehearsed and told organically and from the heart without the use of notes.
- Stories will be shared back to back, without any comments or questions during or between. There will be time after all stories are told for an open, reflective dialogue.
- A story is based on one's own authentic, unique experience and can come from anywhere – a memory, a dream, a reflection, an encounter. A story is not rhetoric, opinions or analysis, all of which should be avoided.
- Because stories come from one's own experience, that person alone is the expert. Listeners, be open and curious, refraining from judgement or the urge to fix, save, advise, or correct.
- Engage in active, deep listening – Connect with the storyteller through eye contact and body language; Be present with a story, absorbing the details and nuances; Take time to reflect and assimilate during the silent pause between each story.
- Storytelling is a powerful way to connect with others, but it also requires a willingness to be vulnerable and exposed. Therefore, building trust in a story circle requires a promise to respect the privacy of all participants. Unless permission to share is granted by the storyteller, stories themselves remain in the circle. The lessons learned from the collective story circle experience are what may be taken away.
Equalize your guests:

For an in-person event:
- Sit your participants in a circle. The physical space that is occupied in the circle is arranged so that everyone can be seen and heard equally. The space at the center of the circle is the generative ground where story seeds flourish into collective meaning.

- Give each person the same amount of time to share their story. If someone is not ready when their turn comes, allow them to ‘pass’ and tell their story at the end of the circle.

For a virtual event:
- Invite each person to turn on their camera. Respect if a participant does not wish to share their environment.

Cultivate Connection:

- A warm-up story serves two purposes: a) To model the expectations and logistics of the experience and b) To allow an opportunity for participants to become familiar and comfortable with each other.
- For this exercise, the host introduces a prompt such as “What inspires hope in you?” Participants are then called upon to offer a brief response (just a few sentences). Pause for reflection between each story just as for the actual story circle.

Host plants the first seed:

- After the warm-up story circle, share your story.
- The host’s story matters because group members will follow the host’s lead and will be more comfortable trusting the group once the host has done so.

The circle grows, the storytelling:

- Pause for a few moments after telling your opening story. Then remind the group of the prompt and go around the circle, giving each person the same amount of time to answer the prompt.
- Ideally, the circle will consist of three rounds, each with a different story prompt. If you are using the provided prompts, the first story prompt is an introduction, the second a provocation, and the third a call to hope.
  - Rotate the starting position in the circle so that the same participant is relied upon to always go first, or allow participants to volunteer an order. You may choose to take a slightly longer pause or even a break between prompts.
  - Pause for a few moments between storytellers but do not comment or invite conversation.
  - If participants want to talk, remind them that there will be time at the end.
  - If a participant needs to pass, come back to them at the end of the round or when they are ready.

Closing your gathering:
How to transition people out of the gathering:

How you end your story circles will shape people’s experiences, sense of meaning, and memory of the experience.

- After everyone has had an opportunity to share their story, take a moment to sit in reflection.
- Then, sincerely express your gratitude for people’s willingness to share their stories.
- Let your guests know that there are two, short closing activities and then the gathering will come to a close.

Closing Activity 1, Catch and Store:

This is a way to acknowledge and reflect on the stories shared.

- Ask participants to describe, in one sentence, what this gathering has done for their awareness and relationship to the people in the room.
- Again, anyone may pass if they are not ready to share when it is their turn.
Closing Activity 2, Sharing the Surplus:

Prepare to part and consider how you will share what you have learned.

For an in-person event:
- Ask participants to fill out a commitment card. Allow 5-7 minutes for completion.

For a virtual event:
- Ask participants to take 5-7 minutes to write on a piece of paper three actions they plan to take inspired by the stories shared. This may happen on or off-line.

Sprout: How will this gathering continue to grow

- Share with participants opportunities for future involvement, including inviting participants to host their own circles (https://engagement.uni.edu/imaging-america/gather-grow).
- For example, if there are plans for an artist to create a mural inspired by the stories, please let participants know how they can participate and/or view the artwork. If there are upcoming events in the community that might be of interest to the group, please share those events at this time.

Exit line:
Finally, close the event by sharing a quotation, poem, or taking a deep breath as a group.

Tips for Gather to Grow Hosts—Group Dynamics

Hosts will want to keep in mind that most groups will work through stages of development as they meet together and share their stories. Typically, groups work through the following:

- **Forming:** At this stage individuals will get to know the leader and one another through self-disclosure and listening to others. Oftentimes the leader and group members identify some ground rules or agreements about the environment they want to create.

- **Transition:** Many times it is very normal for groups to progress through transition stages. During this stage, group members may share their differences of opinions and work through various types of resistance. During this stage it is important to listen to all points of view and continue to create a safe space for sharing.

- **Ending:** When the group comes to a close, it is important to discuss what each member learned from participating in the group and how they can take what they have learned and apply it to the larger community. In Gather to Grow Story circles, this is accomplished through commitment cards, written reflections, and creation of artist expressions of the event.

In addition to group communication, the group leader can use the more specific skills of active listening and blocking. **Active listening** involves nonverbal engagement and tuning into what the other group members are sharing. Leaders often must model this behavior to help group members settle in to truly listen to one another. At times if there is a disruptive member of the group or someone who continues to dominate the conversation, the skill of **blocking** may be needed. It can be as simple as asking the dominating member to hold on to their thoughts as others share their thoughts first.

Various factors operate in groups that do not operate in one-on-one communication. As a leader, by taking advantage of these naturally occurring phenomena, groups can become more cohesive and productive. Some of these factors that may operate in the storytelling circles include the **sense of universality** and **not feeling alone in one’s struggle** and an **instillation of hope** that by sharing their stories that we will see change and improvement in our communities. As part of these groups, members may experience interpersonal learning and increased meaning and existential awareness of the impact of their stories.

By being aware of the group dynamics that typically operate in groups, leaders are able to create safe, productive spaces for sharing and self discovery.

**Tips for Virtual Story Circle Hosting**

Many virtual platforms may be used to host a virtual story circle. If you are not already familiar with a platform, Zoom is a simple, easy, and secure hosting platform. Here are some tips and guidelines to help you host your Storytelling Circle on Zoom.
If you don’t already have an account, sign up for a free Zoom account.

1. Open the Zoom application on your device.
2. Click on Schedule.

3. Enter the required details: topic (Event title), start time & duration, and time zone.
4. Generate the meeting ID automatically to protect your personal Zoom room ID.
5. Set a passcode to keep your meeting safe and secure for your participants.
6. Click on Advanced Options and check to see that “Mute participants upon entry” is set.
7. You may also assign alternative hosts. Alternative hosts can assist you with muting and unmuting participants during the event. An alternative host can also monitor the chat and assist with technical issues.

If you selected to connect the event to an outlook or Google calendar, then the calendar application will automatically open and generate a calendar event with the Zoom invitation and login information included. You can invite participants to the calendar event. If you selected “other calendar,” then an event invitation with login information will open in a pop-up window. Click the copy to clipboard button and then paste the invitation into emails or another document.

To protect your participants and event, do not share the meeting link, ID, or password on a platform where it can be accessed publicly. For example, do not post the details to a Facebook page or on other social media. Instead invite participants through individual emails/calendar invitations or ask participants to register in order to receive login information. However, if you have a closed Facebook group or chat which you use to communicate with participants, sharing the zoom invitation will only go to group members.

Click on this link for more information about hosting an event.