

Let Me Tell You a Story ...

STORYTELLING: A Toolkit for Bridging Differences and Creating Community



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A Toolkit for Bridging Differences and Creating Community

Description

This resource is designed to introduce teachers and group leaders to a few techniques for using storytelling with a group to build community. It will illuminate issues of difference or assist in addressing incidents or hard conversations within your group. The activities included here will increase awareness of differences and diversity within your group and help build respectful and sensitive relationships. This resource provides step-by-step instruction for three storytelling activities, some tips for leading discussions with your group, and a sample of the type of performance you can make, spontaneously and collaboratively, from true stories.

Purpose

This resource is designed to:

- Create an environment for participants to identify and share some of their important life experiences;
- Raise awareness of the many facets of diversity;
- Encourage empathy for others who have different life experiences;
- Provide a method for introducing and discussing challenging topics;
- Share some creative and energizing time together.

Outcomes

Through participating in these exercises, each individual will:

- Share a personal life experience related to the topic at hand;
- Listen to several stories from their peers;
- Collaborate with their peers in pairs and in small groups to discuss and adapt the stories;
- Engage in a conversation about the varied perspectives represented in the stories.

Audience

This resource is designed for use in a classroom, school organization, or neighborhood group. It can be used with any group of people who share a desire to talk more deeply together. It is appropriate for individuals from middle school students to adults.

Why Storytelling?

The act of sharing stories can be traced back to the beginning of human history. Storytelling allows us to connect with each other and to make meaning of our world. Our life experiences shape who we are and how we interact with others and the world each day. We carry our life stories along with us on our journey and they become the most precious gifts that we can offer to each other.

When we share our life stories with others, we open up opportunities for seeing in new ways, for grappling with new ideas, and for growing into more respectful and compassionate people. Issues of conflict, misunderstanding, stereotype, and oppression, issues that can be very complicated and frightening, can be effectively addressed, discussed, and even healed by approaching them through true stories.

This resource is meant as an introduction to ways in which storytelling can build community, illuminate issues of difference, or assist you in addressing incidents or hard conversations within your group. It will increase awareness of differences and diversity within your group and help build respectful and sensitive relationships.

The activities in this resource may be completed all at once or they may be broken up and completed over a longer period of time.

Notes for the Facilitator

When bringing storytelling exercises to a group, it is important to remember that some people may find it easy to talk about their lives while others may struggle to think of anything to say. In any group there may be individuals who have a lot to say and others who are convinced that, “nothing important has ever happened” to them. The facilitator’s role is critical in shaping an environment for this work.

You should prepare to share your own story. Once you have settled on a theme and prompt question for the exercise (this step is discussed later in the description of The Story Game), you should prepare your own story to get the group started. Your story, told in a respectful and concise manner, will demonstrate an example of the tone and type and length of story you’re asking the participants to share. It is important to remember that underneath all the timed steps and activities required for the exercise, this is ultimately about building relationships and listening to each other. As the exercises progress, if issues arise, it is important to take the time necessary to attend to the needs of the group. Honoring the feelings and fears and breakthroughs that occur is the most important step of all.

The facilitator’s script will be in red throughout. This is suggested language that you may use for directly addressing your group. If possible, read through the script a few times before beginning with your group so that you understand the steps and can make the language your own. There are also additional notes in italics to you, the facilitator, throughout; these are things for you to consider or be prepared for.

Preparing the Space.

This resource is designed around the belief that storytelling is most effective in an environment of trust, openness, and respect in which each person feels supported to speak and listen well. Setting the tone for this space is important.

Model Positive Energy And Enthusiasm.

As soon as you say the words ‘storytelling’ and ‘performance’ some people will brace themselves for fear of being embarrassed or exposed. You can assure everyone from the beginning that they will not be asked to share anything that they do not want to share. The activity works best when people step out of their comfort zone to reveal something true about themselves, but it is best to caution everyone that this is not the time to reveal deep dark secrets or bring out events that will only leave them feeling upset. If this does occur, you should be prepared to offer comfort and some follow-up conversation.

Clear the room as much as possible.

If you need to use chairs, form them into a circle. Otherwise, clear the room of furniture.

Do what you can to create an energized and flexible space in which people can move around, sit on the floor, and cross the room easily to meet with one another.

Establish Some Group Agreements.

Whether or not your group already has established trust and respectful ways of talking, it will set a new tone if you take the time to establish some group agreements, or ground rules, before proceeding.

Group Agreements are most effective when the group determines them together through a quick brainstorming exercise. After you introduce the day’s activity, ask the group directly, “What are some guidelines that we can agree on for working together today?” You may want to start by suggesting one or more from this list:

We agree to use “I Statements,” not to interrupt each other, to listen well, to respect each other’s differences; we acknowledge that we don’t have to agree or approve of everyone’s opinion, but we will respect their experiences.

You may take each suggestion and ask the group, “Is this something we can agree on?” Sometimes someone else in the group might offer an addition or variation, and then, when everyone can agree, write the idea on a large sheet of paper or on the board where everyone can see it and refer to it throughout the activity.

Establishing Group Agreements is one way of sharing leadership with the group and empowering individuals to assist in maintaining a respectful environment.

Supplies

White paper, markers, and tape or chalk for Group Agreements

A bell or other noisemaker for getting everyone’s attention rather than yelling.

A watch or clock with second hand to keep time in activities.

Activity I: Who’s in the Room?

This exercise is a quick warm-up that gets everyone on their feet and talking and offers a chance to practice storytelling and listening skills.

Time needed: approximately 20 minutes for a group of 20

Begin by asking the group a few questions and allow for some discussion and examples.

Who has ever been interviewed? What type of interview was it? What was the experience like for you? After hearing some reactions, introduce this game.

Now, look around the room and find someone you don’t know at all, or don’t know very well, or haven’t worked with before in this group. Go and stand next to your partner and find a place to settle in the room.

This should happen very quickly. If you know the group well, keep an eye out that best friends separate and everyone gets matched up. If you have an odd number, make one group of three.

Decide with your partner who is A and who is B.

Now, A – you have one minute to interview B. In that one minute, you need to find out their name, where they’re from, what year they’re in, what they want to be when they grow up, their favorite color, their favorite band and one story about a place they love to visit. After one minute, I’ll ring this bell and call “Switch” and then it’s B’s turn to get the information. The game is to try and remember as much as you can from what your partner tells you. Ready? Go!

You can decide the relevant questions based on the ages and interests in the group. The questions should be factual in nature and easy and fun to answer. Much of the joy of this game comes from keeping time each step of the way. After both A and B have had turns:

Stay with your partner and let’s form a circle. Now, one pair at a time, each pair will go to the center of the circle and take turns introducing your partner to the group. You have only 30 seconds to tell us everything you can remember from your interview. Who’s first? Lets go!

Group Discussion after game:

After each pair has gone through the introductions, take some time to reflect together on the exercise. Some possible discussion questions include:

What was it like to interview your partner? To be interviewed?

How did you communicate to your partner that you were paying attention?

You can add more questions and tailor this discussion to the needs of your group. This is a good time to talk about the importance of paying attention, maintaining eye contact, and not interrupting as good techniques for building trust when listening to stories. This is also a good time to notice the diversity that is present in the room and the wide range of experiences that the group has to share.

Activity II: The Story Game

This exercise gets everyone in the room telling a story and listening to several stories in response to a prompt question. Through a series of steps, small groups are formed and short, spontaneous performances are created to share a few of the stories with the large group.

Time needed: There are a few variables in this exercise that will determine how long it actually takes. It is better to have more time to discuss at the end than to have to cut off the exercise before it's over. Once you get the group moving toward performance, it will be difficult to shorten the time available for them to complete the task. The Story Game works best when you keep to the time you set with the group, whatever you decide.

This is an overview of steps with estimates of how much time each step requires for a group of 20 people.

Introduction of Exercise	15 minutes
First Round of Stories in Pairs	6 minutes
Second Round of Stories in Small Groups	8 minutes
Preparing the Performances	10 minutes
Performing the Scenes	25 minutes (4-5 minutes each scene)
Group Discussion	20 minutes

Introduction of Exercise

10 minutes

We are going to do a special activity today. You already have everything you need to do this activity and, in fact, you are an expert, because it is based on the true stories of your life and each person in this room. Everyone's story has value, and today we will discover together how by listening to each other we can learn a great deal about our world and ourselves. Who has a storyteller in their family or in their life? Who is that person? What did you gain from knowing that person? Can you describe the storyteller's style?

Allow the answers to these questions to lead to the question – **What are stories?**

Allow the group to respond. You may want to bring in some of the ideas from the “Why Storytelling?” section at the beginning of this resource. Also, if you did the “Who’s in the Room?” activity together, you could mention here that stories get beyond the facts to the details and feelings of the events in our lives.

Here are some key points to bring up in your discussion with the group:

- Stories have **ACTION**; they are events in which something happens.
- Stories involve people, sometimes just two, sometimes many.
- Stories often have a **BEGINNING, MIDDLE AND END**.

For today's activity, I am going to give you a prompt question. I'm going to ask for you to tell a particular story and most likely, the first story that jumps to your mind when you hear the prompt is the right one. There are no right or wrong stories; whatever story you choose to tell today will have value for the group. Try not to censor yourself. At the same time, the story you tell here today should feel **SAFE** to share. This is not the place for a story that will make you feel very fragile or unsafe. Is that clear? I do want you to tell a story that's important to you. Tell a story that made a difference in your life. No one wants to hear the story about what you ate for breakfast. Any questions? Okay, here's the question for you.

Announce the question here.

The Question

The Activity works best with broad and open-ended questions that could have multiple interpretations. First, identify the theme you want to address. Second, formulate your prompt in a way that asks for a story. Here are some examples to get you started:

If you'd like to build community in a general way, you might ask:

Tell me a story of a time when you felt strong.

Tell me a story of a time when you surprised yourself.

Tell me a story about a time when you stood up for something you believed in.

If you'd like to start a conversation about race:

Tell me a story of when you were proud of where you come from.

Tell me a story of a time when you felt like you were on the outside.

Tell me a story about a special time with your family.

If you'd like to get at issues of Insider/Outsider status:

Tell me a story of a time when you were misunderstood.

Tell me a story of a time when people didn't see you for who you really are.

Tell me a story about a time when you were alone and then someone helped you.

If there's been a bias-related incident or you need to have a hard conversation:

Tell me a story about a time when you stood up for something you believed in.

Tell me a story of a time when you had faith.

Once you announce the question, take the time to explain the entire game. This gives people a chance to settle in with the question and start thinking of a story while getting the information they need to move forward. One of the strongest aspects of this game is the decision making and relationship building that happens while the pairs and small groups are working together. For this reason, less is more from the facilitators once the game has begun. If you clearly explain the game at the beginning, you will be able to ring your bell when time is up at each step, remind them of the next step, and move the group along without too much interference.

Look around the room and see who is here with you. After I explain the game, I will ask you to find a partner in this room, someone you don't know very well. You will find a partner and together sit somewhere in the room. You will decide who is A and who is B and you will each have two minutes to tell your story in response to the prompt question.

When it is your turn to speak, tell your partner everything you can remember about that day –everything that happened as well as any details you can remember - the weather outside, the people who were there, what was said, how it smelled, as many details as you can call up. When it is your turn to listen, pay attention, remember the details and support your partner by making eye contact and not interrupting. At two minutes, I'll call time and you'll switch.

After you have each told your story, I will ask you to choose one of them. Both stories will be good stories, but you will have to choose one story to go on to the next round. Choose a story with action and characters. Once you have your one story, I will put you into a small group of four and you'll share your one chosen story. In the small group, the four of you will select one story. You will then have ten minutes to work together to figure out how you want to share the story with the larger group. You can act it out or narrate it. You can perform as inanimate objects and you can act feelings. You can use dialogue, song, or a silent choreographed dance. Truly, the possibilities are

endless. Let your imagination fly and take some risks. You will have ten minutes for this section and then we'll gather around and watch the scenes. Questions? Now, just think of one step at a time. Find your partner; find a place to settle in the room, decide who is first.

After this has happened – Now, begin with your first story.

First Round of Stories in Pairs **6 minutes**

This step provides opportunities for practicing listening and storytelling skills. Pay attention while partnerships get formed so that people pair up with others that they don't know very well, if this is possible. Also, if there's a pair that looks particularly uncomfortable together, you may easily intervene at this stage and make a better match. You can adjust this initial storytelling time limit to three or five minutes, if you have the time, but whatever you announce it to be, hold it to that length.

Second Round of Stories in Small Groups **8 minutes**

This step provides opportunities for practicing leadership and cooperation skills. You can add in this step that if A's story was chosen in the first pair, B should be the one to tell it to the small group. Allow two minutes each for the retelling and instruct them to keep the details intact this time through, to tell the story as accurately as possible. In the group of four, they choose one story.

Preparing the Performances **10 minutes**

This step provides opportunities to practice using imagination, communication and expressive skills. Each group of four must negotiate the best way to present that story to the rest of the group. This will look differently for each group depending on levels of shyness and leadership. During this time, walk around and encourage groups to think on their feet. If they are stuck, encourage them to try out an idea, reminding them it doesn't have to be perfect or funny or smart, it just has to tell the story and be ready in ten minutes! When a group is having a particularly difficult time figuring out the logistics, you might need to intervene and make some suggestions, just to get them started. Resist the temptation to tell them how it should be done. The tension that arises out of having to work through the challenge can be useful for discussion later. If you have one or more groups down to the wire and not ready, you can extend the time in this section without forfeiting the momentum in the game. If a group is done early, encourage them to practice by running through their scene a few times until the others catch up.

Performing the Scenes **25 minutes**

This step provides opportunities to practice public speaking and a variety of performance skills. When time is up, call everyone to sit together facing one area of the room that will be the performance area. During the presentation of the scenes, you may want to instruct the groups to begin their scenes by calling 'Action' and end by calling 'Scene.' This gives the performers a hand in focusing the audience. The facilitator may also want to ask at the end of each scene whose story was represented. Often by the time the group has performed it, there is a shared ownership of the tale but this formal recognition brings the exercise full circle for the storytellers. One at a time, watch the performances.

No matter what happens, after the performances, it is important to affirm the work completed by the group with applause and recognition of their bravery. Then, gather everyone in to a circle for discussion.

Group Discussion **20 minutes**

This step provides opportunities for talking about difference, social justice, and the feelings associated with particular events.

What was it like to tell your story?

What was it like to listen to others' stories?

What was it like to have your story performed by others?

If you want to focus on building community within the group, you may also want to ask,
What was it like in your small group deciding how to perform the story?
How did you make decisions together?

Lead into discussion of the content of the stories by focusing on your goals for the day. Some possible beginning questions are:
What moments stood out to you from the stories?
What surprised you?

You may even want to discuss stories one at a time or point to particular moments in a story:
What feelings came up for you while you watched Jack's story?

Finally, bring the discussion around to what we can learn from stories.
What do these stories teach us about race and differences?
What do these stories teach us about how it feels to be left out?
What are some things we can learn from each other today?

You may want to write some of these observations on a white sheet that everyone can see as a record of the day.

Activity III: The Story Circle

This activity is an opportunity to sit together and talk and listen. The time it takes to do this activity can be anywhere from 30-60 minutes, depending on the size of your group and how much time you allot for each story.

A Story Circle is a chance for each person in the group to volunteer a story without interruption for a set period of time.

Gather chairs in a circle and sit together. You may want to introduce an object or a talking stick that can be passed while stories are told. This helps to establish the ritual with the group. The facilitator should introduce the exercise very simply. For example:

Today we're going to take the time to get to know each other a little better. I'm going to ask you to share a true story from your own life about a time when you stood up for something you believed in (you could substitute any prompt, depending on the needs of your group). We'll take turns talking and each of us will have about two minutes to tell our story.

While someone is talking, the rest of us should listen and pay attention to their story and not interrupt.

I chose this theme for today because we've had some misunderstandings in our school lately. There have been some disrespectful things said in the halls and several of you have come to me with concerns about what to do. I have asked you to take leadership and set a good example of treating each other with respect and I know how difficult it can be to stand apart from the crowd. So today, I'd like us to use examples from our own lives to think about times in the past when we have been brave and stood up for what we believe in no matter what others said about it. Okay? I'll go first.

You may go in random order or around the circle in one direction. If you decide to go around the circle, give people the option to pass and come back if they haven't yet thought of a story when their turn arrives.

The facilitator should have a watch with a second hand and a bell or chime or hand signal that lets the storyteller know they are out of time. It is best not to cut people off abruptly, but do keep to the time set as much as you can so that everyone has a chance to speak.

As you move around the circle, thank people for their stories.

You won't need to discuss much at the end of a story circle. It would be good to check in, ask how people are feeling, thank them for their stories and assure them that by taking the time together in this way will lead to better relationships with each other.

Further Uses of Storytelling

Once you have introduced storytelling with your group, you have lots of options for how you might want to continue integrating true stories into your work together. Here are some ideas based on the work in this resource:

Regular Story Circles

The Story Circle can become a regular part of your routine together. Once the group gets comfortable with sitting, listening, and letting the stories come, this model can provide you with a method for exploring issues and even discussing painful subjects during hard times. Building trust is essential. If the group has experienced a major rift, you may need to introduce some trust building exercises before asking people to be vulnerable with each other by sharing stories.

Revisiting The Story Game

The Story Game only gets better once people are familiar with how it works. By changing partners and changing the prompt question, the game becomes a new experience each time and participants get bolder in their performances. You can also give the group the extra challenge of creating a scene with no words or integrating music or particular props.

Creating a Performance for Others

By playing The Story Game you create a bunch of scenes quickly and collaboratively. If you are interested in creating a performance for others, you could play the Game a few times as a way of developing potential material. As you watch scenes, give them titles and take notes so that everyone remembers. If you want, you can also write out the improvised dialogue as a script for a more formal record.

Once you have a handful of scenes you really like, decide on an order for the performance and begin to practice. If you have a colleague who knows about staging and pacing, see if they can help you tighten up the moments and make it clear for an audience. In any case, just by using your instincts and staying true to your desire to share the stories, you can create an informal performance for others in your school or community to learn from and enjoy.

A Final Thought

In addition to helping you deal with the hard stuff, storytelling can bring a lot of joy into your group or classroom. We hope that this resource will provide you with some essential tips and even more inspiration to continue to create opportunities for sharing stories so that you can learn from each other and build a stronger community.

SAMPLE STORY AND PERFORMANCE

Prompt Question:

Tell me a story about a time when you were alone and then someone helped you.

Sample story:

When I first got here, I didn't know anybody. My friends from grade school all went to a different school. I mean, I wanted to come here, but I didn't know how bad it would feel to show up all by myself. I remember the first day. I had no idea where I was going. All the halls looked the same, and I had to keep asking people where my classes

were. I felt really stupid. Maybe being Latina was part of it. I didn't see a lot of other Latina kids here and that was different from where I come from. So after like three classes, I found the cafeteria and I got some food and tried to find a place to sit down and eat, I thought I would just sit by myself, but there were no empty tables anywhere. I saw this one table and there was some room on the end so I went over and asked if I could sit there. There were three people and they just sort of looked at me for a minute and then finally said, "okay." So I sat at the other end and I ate by myself and that was that. The bell rang, and I left.

So the next day, I met some people in my classes but they didn't have the same lunch as me, so at lunch time, again, by myself, I go to the cafeteria, get my food, go to that same table and sit down. This time, they said "hi" when I walked over but they kept to themselves.

So that night I was really depressed because I felt like maybe I had made a big mistake coming to this school and I called Callie, she's my best friend, and we started talking. She was already making friends at her new school and she said, "What's going on? You've never had a hard time making friends before." And I thought, she's right, I've always been really outgoing and surrounded by people, why am I so scared? So I decided to take things into my own hands and I started just introducing myself to people in classes and the hall and realized that everyone else, well, everyone else in my class, was also new and just as nervous. And when I went in to the cafeteria, I started to walk towards the same table with the kids who didn't talk to me when I heard someone call my name and it was this girl that I had just met in my class that morning. We didn't even realize we had the same lunch and she was at a different table with some cool people and they invited me to sit with them. So, that's what I did, and she was my first friend here.

One performance option for the sample story:

One person narrates the story.

One person plays the new girl, we'll call her Jess.

The other two performers alternate playing the quiet kids in the cafeteria who don't talk, Callie, and the friendly kids at the end. They can make slight adjustments to their clothes or use props if they want, but with a narrator, it will not get confusing to do this sort of doubling.

Narrator: When I first started at this school, I didn't know anyone.

We see Jess standing alone.

My friends from grade school all went to a different school. I mean, I wanted to come here, but I didn't know how bad it would feel to show up all by myself. I remember the first day. I had no idea where I was going.

While she says this, the actor playing Jess can be searching for a room, packing her bag, etc.

Narrator: All the halls looked the same.

Jess: Can you tell me how to get to room 112?

A Student points to the right.

Jess: Thanks!

Narrator: I felt really stupid. So after like, three classes, I found the cafeteria and I get some food and tried to find a place to sit down and eat, I thought I would just sit by myself, but there were no empty tables anywhere.

Jess walks over to two students sitting and facing each other, talking quietly, maybe they improvise some dialogue about a party or a sports game.

Jess: Um, hey, do you mind if I sit over here?

The two students look her up and down and shrug.

Narrator: So I sat at the end and I ate by myself until the bell rang and I left.

Actors can repeat the action or just hold where they are during this next part.

So the next day, I met some people in my classes but they didn't have the same lunch as me, so at lunch time, again, by myself, I go to the cafeteria, get my food, go to that same table and sit down.

Two Students: (mumble) hi.

Jess: Hi.

Narrator: That night I called my best friend.

Jess and Best Friend mime phones or face each other.

Jess: I don't like it. I think I made a mistake.

Callie: Why? You were so excited!

Jess: I don't know anyone. I sit by myself in the cafeteria. It's so depressing!

Callie: Wait a minute. That is so not like you.

Jess: What do you mean?

Callie: You've never had a hard time making friends before. What's going on? What are you scared of?

Jess: I don't know.

Callie: Listen. You're a great person, they just need to get to know you first.

Narrator: So I decided to take things into my own hands and I started introducing myself to people in classes and the hall and I realized that everyone else, well, everyone else in my class, was also new and just as nervous. And when I went in to the cafeteria that day, I started to walk towards the same table with the kids who didn't talk to me...

Student: Hey Jess! Over here!

Jess: Hey.

Student: Remember me? Natalie. I'm in your biology class.

Jess: Yeah. Hi. I didn't know you had this lunch.

Student: Yeah. Can you sit with us? We have room. Come on.

Narrator: So, that's what I did, and she was my first friend here.