

STORYTELLING GUIDE: RESOURCE 2

Making Storytelling Inclusive and Equitable



There is a reason that oral storytelling is one of the oldest forms of communication

Unlike more structured remarks, stories offer an unparalleled sense of intimacy between storytellers and listeners, developing a personal connection and communal experience.

In a story, variation is welcomed, creativity is encouraged, and unexpected ways of seeing the world are the foundation. In short, stories are inherently inclusive, breaking down barriers to equity by revealing innate human connections that go beyond external labels. Sadly, it is too easy to take the natural beauty out of a story. When stories are told in contexts that are hyper focused on picking out faults or environments that privilege competition over connection, the listener misses the chance to learn something new from another person's experience. Listening to stories must value connection over critique.

How Stories Promote Inclusion and Equity

In most classrooms and workplaces, stories are often either written down or reserved for informal social time. But how can providing space for oral storytelling improve conditions for inclusion, even in the most formal environments? In places where it is possible to speak authentically, stories:

- Help people speak for themselves, showcasing authentic diversity
- Highlight diverse backgrounds and different abilities and viewpoints as positive
- Explore multiple identities, allowing people to take pride in their unique experiences

- Promote friendship
- Inspire questions and sharing of similar experiences to learn about each other
- Help people make connections within and between cultures
- Open opportunities for talking about themes of injustice and power
- Challenge stereotypes, generalizations, and prejudice by helping people express emotions and engage in meaningful dialogue

Stories can promote inclusion by valuing and unearthing real, honest, and personal experience beyond our own. By their very nature, they create a tradition of sharing and connection beyond one-sided interactions. The key is not to force people to share personal stories, but to focus on creating the conditions where stories are welcomed as an important part of the work. When stories are required or even evaluated or judged, the storyteller is forced to tell the story in a way that meets someone else's expectations, instead of feeling safe to share what is actually important to them. Stories under these conditions regress to a perceived norm of what a story is supposed to look like, rather than genuine sharing.

Equitable Conditions for Storytelling

It is possible to facilitate storytelling in places like classrooms and workplaces, even within more formal structures like meetings or graded assignments. To do so, it needs to be clear that the purpose of storytelling is to strengthen and improve relationships, as opposed to proving how entertaining or vulnerable you can be. Stories strengthen relationships when they enable people to have a window into how others see and experience the world. In this way, the “right” way to tell a story is when the storyteller is able to effectively communicate their world. Like other forms of public speaking, structure, language, and oral delivery play a role in storytelling. At the end of the day, however, the end result is much more about how authentic and intentional the storyteller was able to be, as opposed to how polished they were in their performance.

Facilitators and listeners play an important role in creating inclusive and equitable conditions that welcome diverse voices. When teaching storytelling and integrating it into daily work:

- Create rituals around when and how stories are told and actively welcoming the sharing of personal experiences.
- Leave the storytelling to the storyteller. Don’t control their journey, unless teaching a rough structure to get new storytellers started or providing a specific time frame.
- Prepare any listeners to learn from the story, rather than judge it.
- Respond with remarks that inquire, encourage, and relate to the story.
- Appreciate the story for what it teaches people about that person, not what it teaches people about someone’s speaking skills.

The Final Takeaway

When teaching people how to tell stories or using storytelling as an activity, there is a fine line between creating the conditions for storytelling and artificially controlling the story itself. Templates, protocols, and rubrics are all still applicable to storytelling, as long as the point is still to open a window into diverse human experiences and outlooks. Structures and tools should be used to enhance the impact that a story has on its listeners and guide storytellers to make intentional decisions about what they say and how they say it. Ultimately, the mark of a good story is its ability to connect the seemingly disconnected in personal, intimate ways.

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