

# Story Circles Toolkit



Above: An image from a 2016 Story Circle at OSU

## *Hello Reader!*

Thank you for your interest to utilize storytelling in your community. Story Circles is a storytelling process that can be used for a stand alone event, as an icebreaker, or main activity for generating connectivity and dialogue between people. It can even be used socially around a kitchen table or Zoom room. Regardless of where or how you would like to use Story Circles, this toolkit shares information about how you can facilitate a Story Circle, the history behind the practice, and considerations for developing storytelling programs and projects.

This guide was created amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The contributors of this toolkit developed a Story Circles training in a remote format to support building relationships during physical distancing. We are grateful to the [U.S. Dept of Arts & Culture](#) (USDAC) for permissions to adapt the original toolkit for experiential learning use at Oregon State University (OSU).

*Enjoy the process!*

“

Stories are powerful and deeply a part of who we are. When we center our stories, we open spaces for building trust, community, and shifting culture. As a leader, I have learned that creating and investing in relationships are integral to transforming the world we live in. Story Circles are profoundly important to the process.

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Micknai Arefaine in Martinez (2019)

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## Table of Contents

What is a Story Circle?	4
Considerations for Size & Formats	6
Size	6
Remote Format	6
In-Person	6
Facilitators	6
Recorders or Recording	7
Facilitator's Guide	7
Introduction	7
Community Agreements/Guidelines:	8
Considerations	8
Script	8
Sample Story Circles Timing	9
Instructions for Individual Story Circle Facilitators	10
Reflection Questions & Reflective Arts Space (optional)	11
Remote Recommendations	12
Documenting Stories	12
OSU Oral History Projects	14
Story Circle Projects located in the OSU Multicultural & Queer Archives	14
Example: From Stories to Co-creating Projects - the Healing Cards Initiative	15
Related OSU Storytelling Projects	15
References & Resources	16



## What is a Story Circle?

A Story Circle is a small group of individuals sitting in a circle, sharing stories—usually from their own experience or imagination—focusing on a common theme. As each person in turn shares a story, a richer and more complex story emerges. By the end, people see both real differences and things their stories have in common. A Story Circle is a journey into its theme, with multiple dimensions, twists, and turns.

Story Circles are often understood as deriving from indigenous traditions. There are many variations. Theatermakers such as [Roadside Theater](#) and [John O’Neal](#) have been central in developing the practice for use in creating original performance and community telling and listening projects. Story Circles can become practical interventions for building shared power and moving to action after hearing themes from the stories and building relationships between individuals.

Each Story Circle is unique and can take on the energy of the group. They can support perspective taking, empathy, cultural humility, listening, courage, vulnerability and healing. Story Circles can be light or deep - depending upon the hopes, intentions, and outcomes of your group.

The Story Circles tool was brought to OSU through our participation in the [People’s State of the Union](#), [Dare to Imagine](#), and [Imaginings](#) campaigns (2015-2018) by Charlene Martinez who served in the role of Integrated Learning for Social Change, a program within Diversity & Cultural Engagement and as an [USDAC Cultural Agent](#).

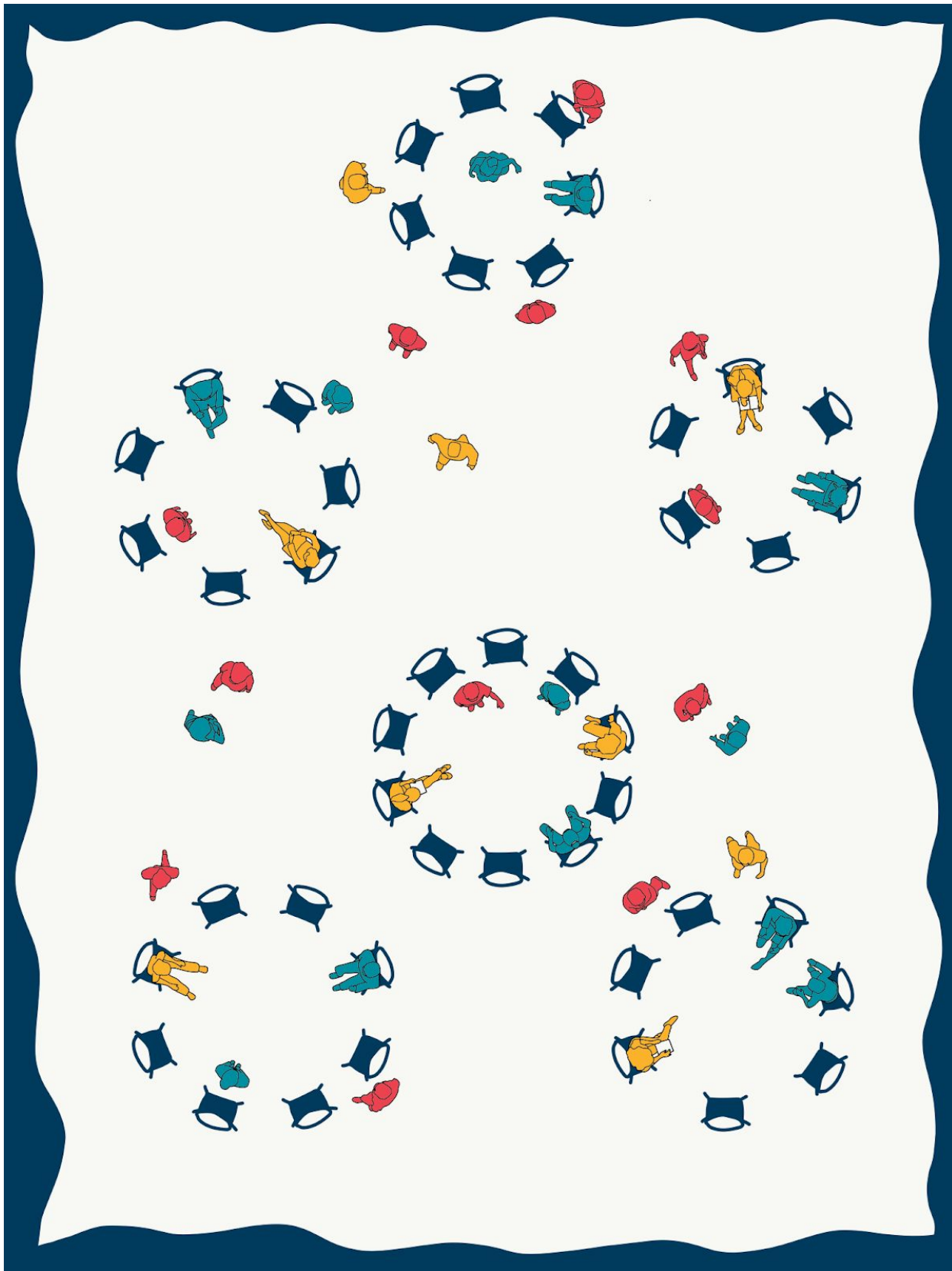
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Story circles taught me nearly everything I know about leadership. They showed me that true leadership is not about how many projects you complete or how many people you reach, but more so about the quality of connection/understanding you have amongst your peers, and how that connection is the essential foundation to doing all meaningful work.

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Hunter Briggs in Martinez (2019)





## Considerations for Size & Formats

### Size

The best Story Circles have 6-10 people. You can do a single Story Circle with people sitting around a kitchen table, or run a Story Circle event with a hundred people divided into a dozen circles. With a large group, you can let people find their own circles, or use a method that randomizes them which is always good for mixing things up. Either count off as you split into groups, with each person counting one, two, three, and so on up to the total number of groups to make random groups of just the right size. Or pre-number blank nametags so that folks can glance at their name tags when it's time to split into groups, then follow the facilitator holding their number.

### Remote Format

Using the Zoom platform you can use the break-out room feature to hold story circles. For remote format 4-8 people are recommended per small group. Story circles can be done with groups in the main room for up to 8 people in a single session, but consider the amount of time your participants will have to be on the screen and factor in your setup and debrief portions.

### In-Person

If you do multiple Story Circles at the same time, space needs to be organized so that people can hear each other without yelling and there isn't too much sound-bleed from the next circle. If you have access to separate spaces such as classrooms, that's a good way to do it. But you can set up several circles of chairs in one big room, such as a gym or church basement, so long as you leave plenty of room between circles.

### Facilitators

Each Story Circle has a facilitator who makes sure that people know and follow the guidelines, keeps time, and ensures that everyone has equal space and attention. The best facilitators are even-handed individuals who don't need to dominate things. Facilitators need training. The best way to train them is to give each of them a copy of these instructions beforehand, then do a demonstration Story Circle together, leaving time to ask questions and share comments as well as follow the normal Story Circle procedure. You can have facilitators arrive an hour before the event to be trained, or do it at a separate time and place.



## Recorders or Recording

Not all Story Circles capture or document stories; sometimes just the telling and reflection is enough. Depending upon the hopes and outcomes of the group, you may want to document the stories that are told. Examples of this might be for Oral Histories projects

## Facilitator's Guide

### Introduction

Story Circles start with everyone in the same space listening to an introduction from the exercise leader. Here's a sample script for that:

Story Circles are a simple way to get at complicated truths. The guidelines are easy, and the results are often surprising.

Basically, we divide into random groups of approximately eight people. Each group has a facilitator and one or more scribes to record stories. Everyone in the group has an equal amount of time—usually two or three minutes—to tell a story on a common theme.

“A story is anything that has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Today we ask you to tell a story of up to 3 minutes based on your chosen prompt:”

- Share a story about a time that made you smile. This could include a connection you had, a moment of pride, or a moment of joy.
- Share a story about a time you felt a sense of belonging—or the opposite—to this nation.
- Share a story about an element or object which grounds you (e.g. ocean, touchstone, etc...).
- Share a story about a mentor or ancestor who taught you something important to you.
- Share a story about a time you broke through a barrier to connect with someone different from yourself or with whom you disagreed.
- Share a story about a time where experienced hope.
- Share a story about familial migration.
- Share a story about a time where you experienced a moment of growth.
- Share a story.... [let it be open ended and let the first story guide or inspire the next one].

Or generate one of your own that meets the needs of your group.





Next, be sure to go over/create Community Guidelines for the group here. We like to use adrienne maree brown's version:

### Community Guidelines:

- Listen from the inside out, or listen from the bottom up (a feeling in your gut matters)
- Be open to learning - stretch yourself, stay curious
- Less preparation, more presence - listen intently and be in the present moment
- Building, not selling - when you speak, converse, don't pitch
- Value the process as much as, if not more than, you value the outcomes
- Make space. Take space. - post-ableist rendition of 'step up, step back'
- Privacy—take the lessons, leave the details
- Yes/And, Both/And - hold space and possibility for multiple simultaneous truths
- Assume best intent, attend to impact
- Self-care and community care

- adrienne maree brown, adapted from Emergent Strategy (pgs. 229-230)

### Considerations

Important components for what makes for a good story circle, make sure people feel:

- Comfortable (Do people need a stretch, water?)
- People have equal attention (Use a timer)
- Included (select a prompt that everyone can answer, no expertise should be necessary)
- Acknowledged (thank people after they tell a story)

Utilize a story-telling format when sharing (e.g. beginning, middle, end; build context for story)

### Script

The facilitator tells the first story, then keeps time and calls on each storyteller in turn. The important things to remember are that:

- A story has a beginning, a middle, and an end. This isn't a time to offer opinions or commentary, but to share something you experienced or observed.
- Listening is as important as speaking; each person receives full attention while telling his or her story. It isn't about performance: the idea is to listen for the essence of what is being shared, however the storyteller wants to tell it.
- If you're thinking about the story you're going to tell when it's your turn, it won't be easy to give your full attention to other storytellers. Don't worry about preparing the best story. Don't make notes. I guarantee that stories will arise in your mind, and you will have one to tell when the time comes. Just focus on listening and the rest will take care of itself.





- Attention passes around the circle in either direction. You can pass, and will be given another opportunity to tell a story at the end of the circle. If someone declines, that's fine. Don't insist.
- There are absolutely no questions, criticisms, cross-talk, or comments on any story while sharing is going on. Every story anyone wants to share is welcome. Even if someone's story reminds you of your own experience—even if you were there when the story unfolded and remember it differently—it's not okay to contradict, correct, or embellish someone else's story.
- We thank each storyteller and take a breath between stories to let them sink in before the next story comes.
- At the end, the members of each Story Circle will take a few minutes to reflect together on what was revealed by all of the stories. Were there common themes? Notable differences? What stood out for you, if anything? What touched you, if anything? What feelings and ideas were sparked? What did you want to know more about?
- Then we'll come back together to share something of what we learned with the whole group. Here's what you need to know about where and when the circles will meet.

### Sample Story Circles Timing

Most groups are telling one three-minute story apiece, but in some other Story Circle situations, you may want to allow enough time for two stories apiece, twice around the circle.

Here's a typical schedule:

:00 Exercise leader introduces process

:10 5 minutes to get into small groups

:15 3 minutes apiece for stories, starting with the facilitator (with a brief introduction and a group of 8, this will equal about 30 minutes)

:45 15 minutes to reflect together on the stories shared

1:00 Reassemble into the large group

1:05 15 minutes to share and discuss

1:20 End



## Instructions for Individual Story Circle Facilitators



- (1) Briefly introduce yourself and if necessary, recap the guidelines and time allocations. Answer any questions about these guidelines.
- (2) Remind people of the prompts.
- (3) Remind people that stories can be about any experience, any situation. All stories have value and there is no right answer.
- (4) Repeat the time limit (e.g. 3 minutes), and say you will signal to wrap up when there are 30 seconds left. Let people finish their sentences when time's up, but don't let them eat too much into others' time. Please bring some type of timer!
- (5) If someone wants to pass on the first go-round, that's fine. Come back at the end to give those who passed another opportunity, but don't insist.
- (6) Tell the first story to set the tone and demonstrate the practice. Unlike everyone else, you will be able to choose your story beforehand. Choose a story that reveals something or means something to you, to model for others that it is safe to share what really matters.

- (7) Thank each person at the end of his or her story, allowing a moment of silence between stories. Then call on the next person.
- (8) At the end, engage the group in reflecting on the stories. Were there common themes? Notable differences? What stood out for you, if anything? What touched you, if anything? What feelings and ideas were sparked? Ask people to raise their hands and call on them in turn. Be sure that no one dominates. Encourage people without putting them on the spot.
- (9) End on time, thank everyone, and return to the large group.

### Reflection Questions & Reflective Arts Space (optional)



- Each person is offered blank paper, markers, or other craft supplies.
- After the participants finish the round of stories have them generate a word and symbol that reflects their feelings or a theme that emerged from the stories.

- If remote, ask folks to have some paper and something to write with nearby so they can generate a picture/word/symbol at the end.
- If in person, invite people to begin the debrief by sharing what they have created and placing the image in the center of the circle.

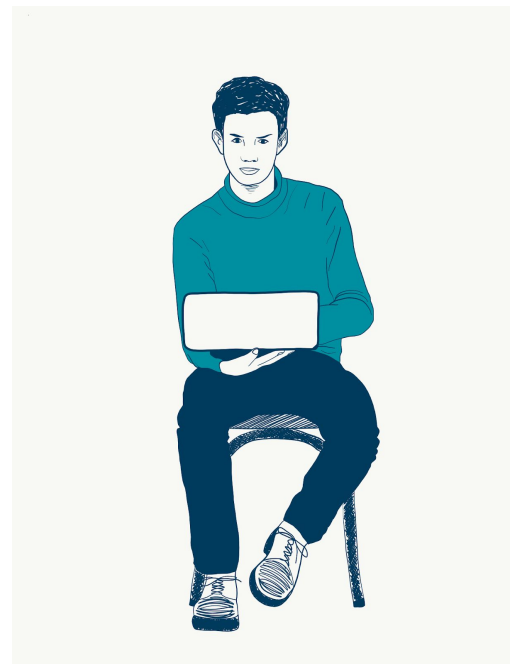
## Remote Recommendations

- Build your team by selecting Story Circle facilitators - enough for one facilitator per room - and a tech facilitator who can coordinate the important behind-the-scenes work of break-out rooms, Chatbox instructions, troubleshooting etc...
- Be sure to put any instructions you would like your small groups to have in the Chatbox before they break into the rooms.
- Plan the timing of the breakout sessions. Include time for introductions (including an ice breaker question), stories, and debrief. Here are some suggested timelines.
  - 3 people x 3 min = 9 min for stories; 2 min for intros; 10 min for debrief = 21 min
  - 4 people x 3 min = 12 min for stories; 3 min for intros; 10 min for debrief = 25 min
  - 5 people x 3 min = 15 min for stories; 4 min for intros; 10 min for debrief = 29 min
- Have participants use the Chatbox feature to introduce themselves at the beginning and close at the end by leaving a word to “Checkout” with thoughts, inspiration, or affirmations.
- Having participants have their screens on, and in particular with the break out rooms during story sharing.
- If recording, make sure that participants know ahead of time that it will be recorded or making sure that the story sharing break out rooms are not recorded.

## Documenting Stories

Capturing stories is really important. Should you want to document your stories or use them for future projects and efforts you will want to have people serve as scribes. You can document and transcribe the stories with the permission of your participants. Grassroots organizations have utilized and captured stories to create artwork, plays, or synthesize information to build power and community-based initiatives.

Inviting people to serve as scribes is a separate process from being a Story Circle facilitator. Tips include selecting capable writers who can type quickly, hear well, spell



correctly, and offer gentle editorial changes that help to clarify stories. These individuals will sometimes be dealing with delicate material, so they should be kind and tactful.

Stories can also include images that people want to share. This works best if in your prompt you encourage people to bring artifacts or pictures which correlate with your story.

- Using a computer, do your best to capture the story in writing while each storyteller is telling it. It's even easier to have two scribes for each Story Circle, each equipped with a computer so they can alternate. (Scribes should also take their turns telling a story.)
- At the end of the Story Circle, connect people with whomever typed their stories and ask them to read the draft text and add or change anything that doesn't capture the story as they wish.
- Be sure each story includes the teller's name (first only, both names, or "Anonymous") and location (i.e., city and state). If the teller would like people to be able to get in touch with responses to the story or ideas for its use, please be sure to include an email address.

NOTE: It's most efficient to get finished stories ready to upload during the event. But there are two other possibilities you can consider if you're unable to write up the stories at the event.

- You can make an audio recording of stories and transcribe and upload them after the event. The simplest way is to pass a digital recorder or smartphone from person-to-person as stories are shared. Be sure to capture each person's name and email in writing and on the audio.
- Make sure participants know what their stories will be used for and get their consent before transcribing the story.

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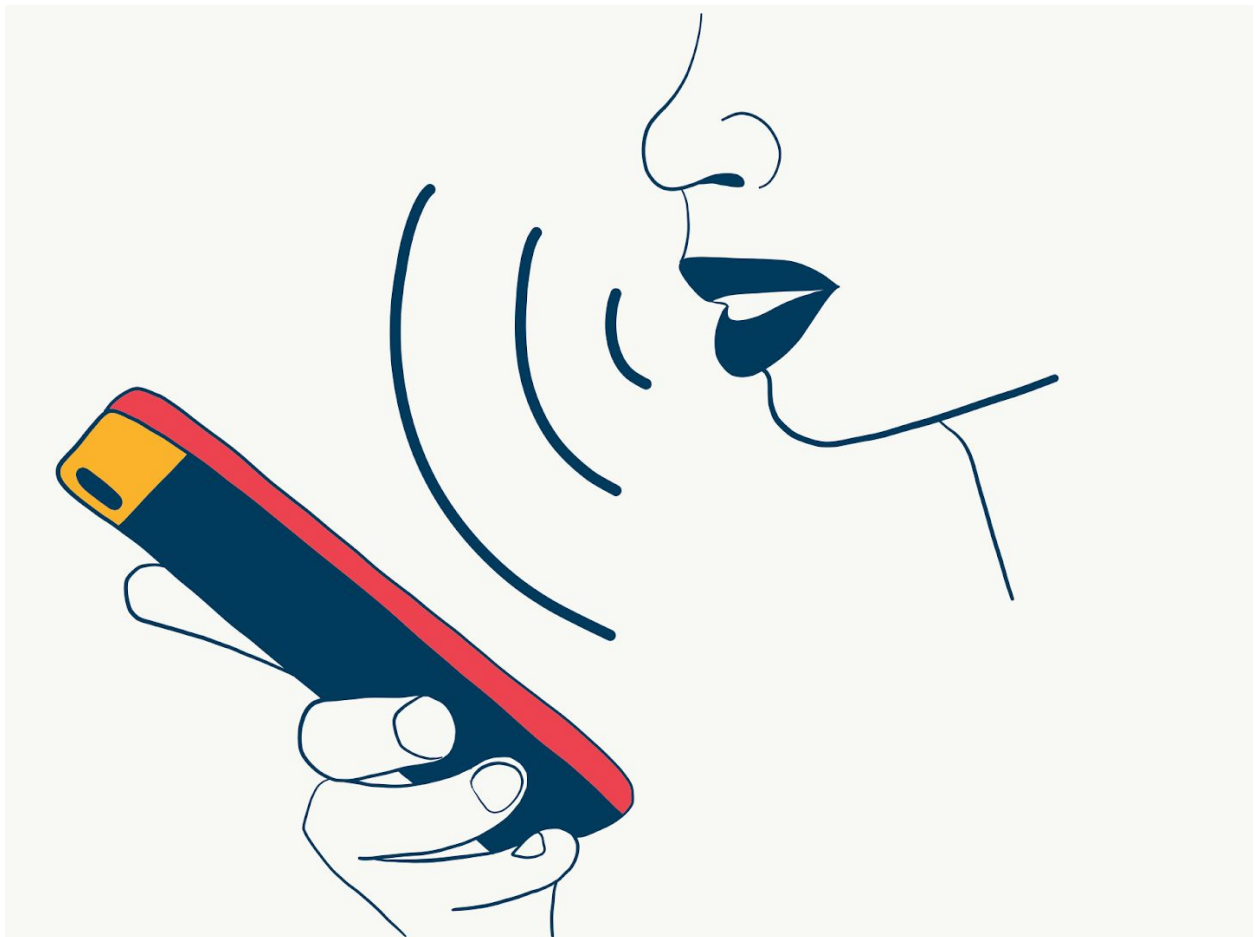
As a leader, empathy is key if you wish to be a good leader; story circles are the ultimate ice-breaker/crash course for building empathetic communities. Overall, I would say that story circles taught me to hold space for pain (my own and that of others), and to use some of those more vulnerable stories as pathways for trust and collective healing.

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Poiema Lee in Martinez (2019)



## OSU Oral History Projects



Story Circles can be used as a method for oral histories and many OSU groups have partnered with the [Oregon Multicultural and OSU Queer Archives](#) to document affinity and community stories. If you are interested in documenting a Story Circle for an oral history project, we recommend making an appointment with Natalia Fernandez [Natalia.Fernandez@oregonstate.edu](mailto:Natalia.Fernandez@oregonstate.edu) to discuss the details of your project, initiate the appropriate waivers and coordinate the process for inclusion in the archives repository.

### Story Circle Projects located in the OSU Multicultural & Queer Archives

Storytelling and oral histories can be powerful tools for participants to remember, resist, and heal. Stories are ways people can co-create power, build empathy, and cultural humility. As students and staff engaged in the story circle process, a few became curious about documenting the stories to be able to provide counter-narratives of living in this region and community. A few themes they talked about included stories on belonging, identity, and



community. The following projects can be found in Oregon State's Multicultural and Queer Archives.

### [Trans Story Circles \(2020\)](#)

In this story circle, participants shared stories regarding the topic of "coming in vs. coming out." The goal of this story circle was to talk about what "coming in" to identity means for the participants, rather than just a focus on stories about coming out to peers, friends, and family. This project is part of the OSU Queer Archives, a growing repository of experiences and perspectives of members of the LGBTQ+ community and their allies who have spent portions of their lives at OSU or in Benton County.

### [Voices Without Borders - Stories of Latinx and Hmong Students \(2016\)](#)

This project was led by Mai Xee Yang and Niché Verdugo, OSU alumni who were former student leaders and activists within the Cultural Resource Centers. Yang and Verdugo were students in an Arts and Social Justice course where they created a story circle program bringing together Hmong and Latinx students to share stories of their parents' immigration stories, their connections to their race/ethnicity, and reflections of their own identities. The participants of the shared experience talked about the similarities and common ground they found through each other's stories. For details about the project check out the [project website](#).

### Example: From Stories to Co-creating Projects - the Healing Cards Initiative

[Healing Cards \(2018\)](#) This is an interactive website and resource with a downloadable deck of healing cards originating from Story Circles about belonging and not belonging. Students shared stories of their experiences and then were asked to reflect about how they were able to heal, grow, or were resilient from their experiences. The Healing Cards were then created from each of the stories, each card representing a value or strategy for healing by students. It is important to note that the project grew from the stories, instead of the other way around. It is critical that those who facilitate and coordinate the process pay attention to what emerges from the stories and relationships that come from the process before moving to action.

### Related OSU Storytelling Projects

Story Circles is one tool to facilitate the sharing and telling of stories. Here we amplify the work of student leaders and staff who center dialogue and topics such as identity, community, and care through podcasts, oral history projects, and webcasts. Some utilized a Story Circle format others did not, however, all of them can be useful resources for your story toolbox. These are a sample from the work of Diversity & Cultural Engagement and Cultural Resource Center student leaders:

- [Between Identities: QTBIPOC Talks](#)
- [4 La Cultura Podcast](#)





- [Making Waves Podcast](#)
- [Multiracial Beavers Oral History Project, 2016-2017](#)
- [Paper Cloud Pride Center Art & Writing Zine](#)
- [WoC Creatives: AYA Still We Persist Webcast](#)

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