

Using Story Circles to cultivate intercultural competences in higher education

What are Story Circles*?

- An approach to developing intercultural competences through sharing and reflecting on personal experiences in a group setting.
- Intercultural competences are attitudes, knowledge and skills that help people communicate and collaborate across difference.

Why should Story Circles be used in education?

- Help participants recognise similarities and differences with others
- Facilitate connection on cognitive, socio-emotional and behavioural levels
- Empower participants to own and enrich their experience

'In the Story Circles, life experience is highly valued as participants make themselves vulnerable in sharing stories of joy and pain as well as struggle and triumph, which engage participants on many levels including emotional, mental, spiritual, and even physical levels.' (Deardorff, 2020, p. 15)

Who are Story Circles about and for?

All participants who wish to develop their intercultural competences. In the education context, this development would benefit all students and staff.

Who can facilitate Story Circles?

Staff and students who are skilled in working with people from diverse backgrounds. They should also be able to demonstrate group facilitation skills and model Story Circles goals (see 1.1).

When are Story Circles best used in an education program?

At the start of the program to help participants to build connections but also regularly throughout to strengthen intercultural learning and relationships.

Where can Story Circles take place?

In a physical or real-time online space that allows for confidential sharing of stories, deep listening, reflection and debriefing.

How can Story Circles be facilitated?

1. Briefing (big group)

- Encourage participants to introduce themselves.
- Brief participants on the purpose (to develop intercultural competences) and goals of Story Circles (see 1.1), especially listening for understanding.
- Go through the Story Circles process with participants (Steps 1-4).
- Model telling a personal experience.
- Emphasise Story Circles are for intercultural learning, not for therapy purposes.
- Ask participants to keep small-group sharing confidential.
- Ask participants not to interrupt or be distracted while a story is being told. They can seek clarification after all stories have been told.

*This resource is based on Deardorff, D. (2020). *Manual for developing intercultural competencies: Story circles*. UNESCO Publishing.

- Ask small groups to rotate the role of timekeeper (e.g. the next speaker – the person to the right of the speaker or the person whose initial is the next letter in the alphabet).
- Suggest a non-intrusive way for a timekeeper to indicate a speaker's time has run out, e.g. signalling the passing of a physical/digital speaking ball or using an online reaction function.
- Suggest a suitable story duration, usually 3-5 minutes per story.
- Ask participants to remain in the same small group throughout the experience to avoid interruption. If online, encourage participants to have their webcams on throughout.
- Check if everyone is comfortable and willing to participate.
- Divide participants into small groups of 3-7 people each.
- Stay apart from the small groups so as not to impact the power dynamic.

1.1. Story Circle goals (Deardorff, 2020, p. 20)

- *Demonstrate respect for others*
- *Practise listening for understanding*
- *Cultivate curiosity about similarities and differences with others*
- *Gain increased cultural self-awareness*
- *Develop empathy*
- *Engage in critical reflection on one's own intercultural competencies development, as well as on the intercultural experience*
- *Develop relationships with culturally different others*

2. 'Get acquainted' round (small groups)

Prompt participants to start sharing their experiences with a small but culturally interesting topic. Select ONE prompt (2.1). If participants are in online breakout rooms, broadcast the prompt.

2.1. Suggested prompts (Deardorff, 2020, p. 34)

- *Please tell us your name and the story about your name. (What does it mean? How did you come to have this name?)*
- *Please tell us your name and three words or phrases that describe your background, and why those words/phrases are important to you.*
- *Please tell us about an object or photo that you brought with you that tells us something about you and your background.*
- *What is your favourite holiday or festival, and why is this your favourite?*
- *What is a favourite food you would eat growing up and how does that relate to your background?*

3. 'Intercultural competences' round (small groups)

a. Select ONE topic for story exchange (3.1). If participants are in online breakout rooms, broadcast the topic.

3.1. Suggested topics (Deardorff, 2020, p. 35)

- *What is one of the most positive interactions you have had with a person(s) who is different from you, and what made this such a positive experience?*
- *What is a memorable experience you have had with a person(s) who is different from you (age, religion, gender, socio-economic, culture, nationality, etc.), and what did you learn about yourself and/or the other person in that experience?*
- *What is a memorable cultural misunderstanding you have had, and what did you learn from this?*
- *Describe someone who you know personally or who is known to you (via media, in history, etc.) that you feel can get along well with others, especially those who are different from that person. What is it that helps that person get along with others?*
- *Describe a time when you realised you believed in a stereotype (about a group you part of or a*

group that you are not part of) that was not true? What happened?

- *Describe a time when you felt supported by a community (of friends, colleagues, family members, neighbours). How would you describe this community in terms of similarities and differences, and how did this community demonstrate support?*

b. Give participants 1-2 minutes of silence to think of an experience to share. This encourages attentive listening. Below are some ideas to help participants tell their personal stories (3.2). They can take brief notes in this form before the first story starts.

3.2. Personal story suggestions

- *Where and when did the experience happen?*
- *Who were involved?*
- *What happened?*
- *Difference/misunderstanding/conflict (if any)*
- *Thoughts (yours and/or the others')*
- *Feelings (yours and/or the others')*
- *Actions (yours and/or the others')*
- *Result/remaining issues*

c. Flashback (after everyone has shared their story)

- Start with the first story: All participants except the storyteller take turns to talk about **the most memorable point** of the story. Each flashback is 15 seconds or less.
- Move to the second story and so on.

4. Debriefing (big group)

- Debriefing/follow-up discussion is essential to Story Circles
- 30 minutes minimum
- Can begin in the small groups if time allows then move to the bigger group.
- Participants reflect on the small-group experience. They can focus on a few questions in 4.1.
- Can use Padlet/Chat if a big group.
- Facilitator observes what has been achieved by the group and establishes that intercultural learning and development is a lifelong process.

4.1. Important questions for debrief (Deardorff, 2020, p. 36)

- *What common themes did you hear from the stories?*
- *What did you learn about yourself through this experience?*
- *What do you want to explore further after hearing these stories?*
- *How has this experience helped you practise listening for understanding and developing empathy?*
- *Stepping back from the experience itself, what are one to two insights you've gained that will help you relate better to those who are different from you?*
- *What will you do as a result of this experience?*