



**A new resource for existing or
prospective service providers
working with diverse communities**



**North York
Community
House**

FUNDED BY

Ontario Ministry of Citizenship, Immigration and International Trade (MCIIT)



PARTNERS

OCASI's Accessibility and Positive Spaces Initiatives



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THE PURPOSE OF THIS TOOLKIT

To share digital stories of newcomer youth with disabilities and/or LGBTQ+ -identified/allied. This tool will support service providers and community advocates to hone their facilitation skills using digital stories to educate and engage communities. To gain new perspectives and awareness in interacting/working with these communities.

**This project was youth-led/youth-created/
youth-approved for service providers.**





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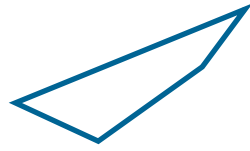
Many of the key learnings of this project were made possible by our strong partners in this project - the Ontario Council of Agencies serving Immigrants' (OCASI's) Accessibility and Positive Spaces Initiative. Huge thanks to Chavon Niles, the Accessibility Initiative Coordinator, for all your guidance throughout this project and for your contributions to this toolkit!

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Thanks to our key funder for making this project and toolkit possible - the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship Immigration and International Trade (MCIIT).

Finally, we'd like to thank all those of you who pick this toolkit up and continue to keep this dialogue open in your own communities. Our hope is that this toolkit will sustain commitment for diverse communities to feel more connected and supported.

Zestaline Kim
Program Manager
North York Community House



OBJECTIVES OF STORY CIRCLES

After using this tool, users will be able to conduct sessions where their participants will gain:

1. a **humble exploration** of self and their identity in relation to others (a sense of understanding)
2. more **connections** and comfort in sharing with others in the community/workplace
3. **knowledge and awareness** of being an ally, being supported, and how to support others

GOALS

1. EXPLORE
2. CONNECT
3. LEARN



WHAT IS THE PERSPECTIVES PROJECT?

North York Community House (NYCH) is a dynamic neighbourhood centre offering innovative programs and services to newcomers and residents, helping build strong, healthy communities.

Our settlement workers identified a need for greater awareness and understanding for newcomer youth from marginalized communities, in particular, LGBTQ+-identified or questioning youth and youth with different abilities. We realized that these youth needed greater support from their wider community - parents, teachers, other youth, neighbours, and service providers. But, how do you get this support among all the silencing?

For the last 2 years, a team of 10 awesome LGBTQ+ and disability-identified and allied Peer Leaders worked to create their own digital stories. A digital story is a 2-5 minute personal first-person narrative using images, video, and sound. NYCH has been using digital storytelling as a tool to share experiences and perspectives from our diverse communities since 2008.

The Perspective Project Peer Leaders then took their stories and shared them through story circles. In the last year of the project, they ran story circles with over 300 community members and more than 90 service providers to gain experience and knowledge for putting this toolkit together.

It is our hope that this toolkit is a further step toward diverse people openly sharing and receiving each other's experiences, identities, and perspectives in order to build more inclusive and stronger communities.

March 2016





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AN INTRODUCTION TO THIS TOOLKIT

This toolkit is a guide for service providers and community advocates to use digital stories and storytelling to encourage deep conversations of difference and connection across diverse communities. Through the various chapters, readers will:

Chapter 1

Understand the importance of using digital stories as a tool and the benefits of story circles.

Chapter 2

Understand the importance of the anti-racist anti-oppressive framework used throughout this toolkit to explore power, privilege, discrimination, and oppression through past and present examples.

Chapter 3

Learn to set clear goals and objectives for the session that take into consideration both the participants' and facilitators' needs and intentions. This chapter will explore not just how to identify these goals, but set the stage for achieving them with success.

Chapter 4

Learn to plan and prepare for safe and accessible story circles.

Chapter 5

Gain facilitator tips, reminders, and samples for running future sessions.



This toolkit also includes a glossary of terms as well as a compilation of the different digital story scripts and where you can find them online. We recognize that participants have different learning styles and may prefer visual tools/aids; others may understand English content better in the written form. The scripts are available here in full-written form for you to use all or part for sharing with participants. If you do so, please simply reference the storyteller and this toolkit.

CHAPTER 1

WHY DIGITAL STORIES? WHY STORY CIRCLES?

This chapter looks at the importance of using digital stories as a tool and the benefits of story circles.

Benefit of Using Digital Stories

- Visual and audio enhances author-audience interactive experience
- Personal story invites more empathy for participants
- Accessible and far reaching format for timeless connectivity

Listen, Share and Observe

- Valuing lived experience
- New connections form organically between participants

Flexibility of Story Circles to Centre Around Participants' Needs

Transformation and learning possibilities throughout the session for participants



Welcome/About this Guide

This toolkit serves as a guideline for how to conduct an effective story circle session, based on the authors' past experiences and research.

The most important component of a story circle is participants, therefore this toolkit should not be regarded as rigid rules that you must follow but a package of tools available to you which will need to be adapted for different audiences - it is best used with flexibility based on the situation.

We believe in letting the session develop organically to achieve the maximum benefit to the participants for of each session.

When approaching this toolkit we suggest reading it through; digesting the information provided in each chapter, and then developing your own plans for sharing and continuing this conversation in your own groups.

Why Digital Stories

Empathy/Interactive experience

Some people absorb information better when there are pictures, while others connect better with sound - music and intonation. The storyteller triggers participants' sensory emotions and further connects them to the experience through digital storytelling. People often say a picture is worth a thousand words, and one can interpret the purpose of using a video, like these digital stories, in a similar mindset. If a picture can convey a lot of information about an individual, then a video that is compiled with multiple images (photo and art) and the unique voice of the narrator doesn't just convey a story but evokes so much more. That is, the digital story evokes empathy in the viewer through their different senses and emotions. For example, the viewer might not know what it's like

to be an LGBTQ+-identified youth who recently came to Canada, but they can understand feelings such as sadness in missing loved ones or feelings of isolation in wanting to feel connected and understood. It is the emotional connection that helps viewers to relate and better understand both the storyteller and themselves. This maximizes the possibility of participants in feeling the message; and if the space is safe - they will be more likely to share their own stories.

Accessible/Far Reaching

Digital stories are also accessible. They connect different participants through different elements such as tone of voice, chosen music and visual representations for each story, including the option for closed captioning. This provides an approachable way for people with different accessibility needs to experience the stories. Further, this kit also provides scripts of each story for people who have difficulty hearing or understand better through the written word (including those who read English better than hear it).

By having these stories captured digitally, it allows participants to continue to share beyond the story circles and to revisit the stories over and over again. This way they can continue sharing with others, even those in other cities and communities to further build more inclusive communities. Digital stories bring flexibility and accessibility to story circles, workshops, and personal conversations thus fostering rich and timeless connectivity.

Why Story Circles

To have a successful and meaningful story circle for both the facilitators and participants, we found that it was important to follow the group's dynamic. We also found that story circles as a format allowed for the flexibility for facilitators and participants alike to learn from each other and to share openly.

However, this still requires a great deal of awareness on the part of the facilitator to be able to continuously get feedback from the participants, both verbally (they may tell you what they want throughout the session) and non verbal (body language that may cue discomfort and/or distress), and be aware of power dynamics in the space. Thus, we would suggest increasing your own awareness around power and privilege (see Chapter 2), while also using your intuition and keen observation to respond and support respectful and deeper conversations. The most important thing is to let the session develop naturally, while having a basic structure so nothing goes beyond your capability and available resources.

Let the story circle change based on participants' needs, be flexible and humble.

We chose story circles as our key learning and sharing tool for these digital stories because we believe it valued the participants' lived experiences while allowing for new connections to form organically between participants. In some of our story circles, there were little to no participants who were LGBTQ+, disability, youth, or newcomer-identified; while in other story circles many of the participants identified or were allies from these groups. In either case, we found that new connections were formed and that even throughout a given session there was transformative learning and awareness about one's own perspective about self and relation with others.

The story circle model shares some similarities with group counseling, where participants are encouraged to talk about things that matter to them, be it suppressed past, present trouble in life, or the uncertainties about the future. However, it is unique in that the facilitator is expected to begin by sharing their own stories, and set the backdrop as to the kind of topics that will be discussed during the session.



from Chereese's Digital Story 'If That's What it Takes'

CHAPTER 2

THE IMPORTANCE OF AN ANTI-RACIST ANTI-OPPRESSIVE (ARAO) FRAMEWORK

Why do we need to use an ARAO framework? Chapter two attempts to answer this question by providing some early experiences of oppression which allow us to better understand ourselves, our participants and the intersecting dynamics that are at play in our story circles. In our experience, exploring power, privilege, discrimination and oppression is key to increasing knowledge, awareness and connections.

Power is a group or an individual's ability to control/affect the political, economic and social orders and organizations by shaping decisions, actions and values of other groups or individuals. The group or individual expresses their power by enforcing rewards or punishments onto others by shaping the knowledge, values or preferences of others (Alladini, 2014).

Privilege is the experience of freedoms, rights, benefits, advantages, access and/or opportunities afforded to the dominant group because of their group membership or social context while the same is denied to minority groups (Canadian Race Relations Foundations, 2015). It is usually something that the group that has it does not think about.

While we all hold power in varying degrees and in varying instances, it is often in relation to our own or another's privilege that experiences of discrimination and oppression are shaped. The degree of power and privilege one holds in society can be directly attributed to one or more of their identities (e.g. age, race, class, gender, sexual orientation, sexual identity, ability, country of origin, ethnicity, religion/faith, education, legal status, etc.).

Canada is viewed by the world as a loving and peaceful country with great healthcare, equitable education, welcoming and inclusive multicultural policies. However, Canada's history tells a story of mistreatment, discrimination, racism, and prejudice, against those not part of the dominant group (Razack, 1998; Razack, Smith, & Thobani, 2010). These stories about Aboriginals, racialized, disabled, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer/questioning, intersex, asexual, etc., folks are often neglected or glossed over by the dominant group.

Being oppressed is a struggle that many groups in Canada face on a daily basis. It is not always obvious that oppression is occurring, which is why naming it and explaining how it is carried out in our society is important. Below, we present examples of how Aboriginal, disabled, racialized and/or LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer/questioning, intersex, asexual, etc.) folks experience intersecting oppressions based on their identities shaping their experiences.

The current land that many of us call home was violently stolen from its original inhabitants by White European settlers who claimed the land was Terra Nullius which essentially means nobody's land (Razack, Smith, & Thobani, 2010; Thobani, 2007).



Aboriginal people were forcibly removed from their land and their way of life became criminalized through the implementation of European laws by White settlers (Thobani, 2007). Aboriginal children were taken from their families and placed into residential schools where they were forced to speak English, learn through a Euro-Christian curriculum, and abandon their native tongue at all cost. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) shared how these residential schools served as a means to separate children from their families with the goal of weakening familial and cultural ties. Only recently have we begun to have honest conversations about the cultural genocide of Aboriginal people by White settlers and the continued impact of colonization.

From 1867 to 1967, the selection of immigrants to Canada was based on racial and ethnic backgrounds from European countries. Canada rejected or excluded Asians (South, East, and South-East), Jews, Africans, Caribbean, and South/Central Americans from immigrating to Canada. Chinese, Indian, and Black immigrants who arrived before the 1960s did so as indentured servants, with head taxes, and with limited immigration freedoms compared to European immigrants who were able to immigrate with families, wives, and children. While significant legislative changes have been instituted to address racist, sexist, and/or homophobic immigration policies, no similar changes have been made to address ableism in the Immigration Act. Canada's immigration legislation continues to deny or restrict the immigration of people with disabilities by placing them in the inadmissible class. Currently the only

way people with disabilities can enter Canada is if they come as a dependent which tend to be women and children or as refugees under humanitarian conditions. For applicants, the medical exam and the point system serve as a means to weed out those believed to one day become a burden to Canada's health and social services (Dossa, 2009; El-Lahib, 2015; Wiebe, 2009). The assumption that immigrants with disabilities will be a burden to Canada reinforces the negative stereotypes about disabilities and denies the applicants' own attributes, power, and/or other identities. Tanya Titchkosky (2007) says that "disability allows us to think differently" reminding us that difference should be embraced instead of being viewed as negative.

The experiences of LGBTQ+ folks have been widely reported in Canada's history. At one point in time LGBTQ+ folk were considered to have a disability because of their sexual orientation (Laing, 2008). LGBTQ+ folks continue to face discrimination, prejudice and mistreatment based on their sexual orientation and gender identity. With greater understanding of sexual and gender fluidity and advocacy by LGBTQ+ individuals and allies, we are creating greater social awareness about our complex identities. Intersectionality allows us to understand how a person's race, class, gender, age, ability, and other categories overlap and intersect shaping our experiences.

The examples above illustrate how throughout history the oppression of minority groups has created a lack of opportunity (e.g. including access to equitable education, jobs, health and

THE IMPORTANCE OF AN ANTI-RACIST ANTI-OPPRESSIVE (ARAO) FRAMEWORK

human services, upward mobility, etc.) impacting their ability to participate in society. While Canada embraces globalization and romanticizes cultural diversity, the persistent expressions of xenophobia and racial marginalization suggest a continuing political and cultural attachment to the concept of a Y society (Galabuzi, 2001). This is because the dominant group has used their privilege to oppress other groups. The dominant group accomplishes this by enforcing their belief systems through culture, language, economic and political power onto others (Canadian Race Relations Foundations, 2015). Overtime, the dominant group's value system becomes engrained in society and accepted as the normal way of life. Through this process other cultures/identities are seen as "the other." This can be difficult for immigrants and refugees coming from different cultural backgrounds especially those with disabilities and/or LGBTQ+. Those that are part of the dominant group are privileged and hold some power in society while others are oppressed and marginalized.

To say that we live in a world where we are equal dismisses the experiences that each one of us has had. We are born into a social world where certain identities are privileged over others. Dismissing or ignoring it does not mean that oppression does not exist. When thinking about oppression it is important for us to understand that it does not work in a linear way; rather, it is a complex relationship between the person and society. Sherene Razack tells us that a person can be oppressed and an oppressor at the same time. Razack (1998) uses the concept of interlocking systems of oppression to remind us that while we might be oppressed in some ways we also participate in a system that oppresses others. All of our identities intersect and interlock with each other and shape who we are, affording us varying degrees of power and privilege in different situations. Therefore it is impossible to look at our identities as separate.

An anti-racist anti-oppression (ARAO) framework provides us with an opportunity to better understand how certain people experience social and systemic forms of oppression because of their intersecting identities. It also allows us to understand how the world is socially constructed; who has traditionally and continues to be oppressed and marginalized and where we hold power and privilege to make a change. For example, women experience oppression based on their gender but all women do not experience the same type of oppression. A White disabled heterosexual Canadian woman from a middle class family experiences oppression because of her disability but she is privileged because of her race, class, and sexual orientation. ARAO impacts all of our lives; therefore, it is important to consider how a person's identities come to shape their experiences, only then can our work truly be inclusive.

As you move through this kit we ask you to take a few minutes to reflect and respond to these questions:

- 1. What are your identities? How have your identities come to shape your experiences?**
- 2. Can you think of a time you felt marginalized and/or oppressed? How does that make you feel?**
- 3. Can you think of a situation where you hold power and/or privilege? How does that make you feel?**

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CHAPTER 3

SETTING GOALS AND OUTCOMES

The path towards a successful story circle starts with careful planning. In this chapter we provide a guideline on how to set the goals and objectives for each story circle, so that both the participants and facilitators get the most out of the session while ensuring everyone's safety.

Identify Your Own Intentions

- Power/Location/Self-awareness
- Understand your position in the group
- Why are you there?
- What are you hoping to gain by running this story circle?

Identify Participants' Needs

- What motivates them to come out for this story circle?
- Will the participants be a group that you work with regularly?
- Will the participants be a group that knows each other well?
- Do they have commonalities/differences with each other? with the Perspectives Project Peer Leaders in the digital stories? (e.g. age, identity, geographic location, or situation)
- What are your participants' priorities?

Combine facilitator's needs and participants' needs - Setting Appropriate Boundaries to Set the Stage

Maximizing participant's benefit while make sure you feel comfortable and safe
Set appropriate boundaries - considering the levity or depth of the conversation for everyone (both participants and facilitator) to feel comfortable and safe



Identify Goals & Objectives

Keeping the above in mind, set goals & objectives

Evaluation

Did you achieve what you set out to do?

Identify Your Own Intentions

By taking the time to know your own story and envision what it might look like you provide your participants with an understanding of why you care.

Write it out, take your time to connect the dots of different areas of your life that have brought you here today. Find pictures and anchors that pull your story together and feel free to have them with you to share in your story circles. This will enhance the sense of community. Part of the power dynamic at play for facilitators and participants or adults and youth or mainstream and marginalized folks is that there is an expectation that the former group tends to have of the latter group to share without doing the same. In our experience, we have found that facilitating story circles requires the facilitator to share their own stories to enhance the sense of community in the circle and to demonstrate an openness which helps to set the tone for the group.

However, having said this, it is still import to know what you are comfortable sharing. Is what you are sharing relevant? If so, how? The more that you are clear about what you are sharing and your position in the space, the more trust and safety you bring to the session.

If you have a background as a teacher or are a parent who will be working with youth, it is important to be aware of the potential 'top down' structure that your background might create. You may need to adjust your style so that the youth feel invited and welcome to be who they are, and not try to impress or be on their best behaviour. Contemplate how you can maintain a position of facilitator, while allowing room for others to share.

Adversely, if you are a peer and your friends are the members of the group you are in, you may

need to be aware of your position as a peer and a facilitator at the same time. This might mean doing some centering and clear thinking about the structure of the session to ensure your session still achieves its goals and objectives.

You may feel confident when you have the stage, and are an extrovert by nature. In this case, consider your dynamic within the group. Are you comfortable with the silences? Sometimes the silence is a catalyst for reflection and digestion of conversation that is deeply needed.



from Erin's Digital Story 'Becoming Me'

Are you quiet and introverted by nature? Consider reflecting on how you can foster conversation in a way that feels natural to you. Think about your anchors from your own story that you can pull back to when you need to share and rein in the group to a moment of centered focus. Sometimes sharing your anchor is an invitation for your group to do the same.

Take your time as you reflect on your own style and how you will authentically relate to your group with openness and strength.

How do you experience your world and how do you relate to the other people in the group? If you have similar life experiences to the people in your group, how can you use this? And if you don't, can you cultivate curiosity in a way that empowers your participants?

If you focus your listening skills and observation skills, you will be more apt at knowing where your leadership belongs.

“To thine own self be true”
The more that you come to terms with why you are there and what you have to gain/offer- the more the group can organically shape itself.

Being honest about what we, as facilitators, hope to gain from the session helps us to better understand our position in the group and creates a safer more trusting setting with the participants from the outset. Do you want this session to have a learning outcome? Are you hoping to

develop new knowledge and awareness among your participants? Are you hoping to convey a message? Are you wanting this to be a healing circle? What assumptions are you making with your hopes/wants for the session?

Identify Participants' Needs

How well do you know your potential participants for this story circle? Are they a group you work with regularly? Is this a session open to the public?

Is there something in specific that you would like to address? Ask yourself why you are bringing this group together.

What do you understand of your group in terms of:

- accessibility (e.g. language; physical and/or mental abilities/special needs, etc)
- allergies
- boundaries
- safety
- age
- occupation/interests
- sexual orientation culture
- identity

If it's a new group, will you require a registration/intake to learn more? If it's an existing group or a group you're very familiar with, what assumptions might you be making about this group or individuals in the group?

SETTING GOALS AND OUTCOMES

What brings your participants out?

Why will they come to this story circle?

Was it to connect with others?

Was it to connect with others on a particular topic?

Was it because they belong to a regular group?

Was it because they came with a friend?

Was it because there was going to be food?

Whatever brought your participants out, we would recommend still starting the sessions by asking them specifically what they hope to get out of the time together. They may not know or feel comfortable saying or they may indicate a light response such as “meeting new people and learning new skills”. Be aware that if the group is coming together for the first time, trust will need to be established for people to feel more comfortable to open up (see Chapter 5 for icebreaker examples). That being said, it is also perfectly okay that they do not know what they want to get out of the session or if the only reason they are there is to enjoy themselves chatting with others. The key to running an authentic story circle is to respect everyone’s needs and explore new areas for mutual growth and connection. We would suggest listing your participants’ needs and using this list to create a roadmap for your circle. Refer to it throughout your session to ensure you are meeting participants’ needs.

If there are many and various needs, it is also okay to be clear with the participants about not necessarily being able to meet all their needs in the given story circle session. Consider providing follow-up sessions or designing another session



*from Lindsay’s Digital Story
‘Hold Your Head High’*

altogether that is longer and can cover more of what is being asked for. In fact, we have found that when a healthy group dynamic is achieved, a story circle will practically run itself. It then develops into the beauty of a peer support system where members of the community learn to support each other, build friendship, and provide an emotional outlet for those in distress. Participants may then become less prone to substance use and self harm. Even in these peer support settings, the facilitator may need to learn more about their participants individually to deliver a comprehensive solution. Thus, we suggest providing opportunities for participants to share their needs privately (through a registration/intake form that identifies special needs, through one-on-one supportive counselling time, or through journaling or other platforms to share beyond the spoken word).

Combine Facilitator's Needs and Participants' Needs - Setting Appropriate Boundaries to Set the Stage

Knowing what you want the session to be and knowing your audience is the first step to setting the right stage. Being honest about both your limitations and the boundary limits of your participants is crucial for preparing achievable goals and outcomes for your session. Knowing your limits during the planning stage means that you can take time to further research information, explore, and self-reflect before facilitating your session. Consider inviting additional supports such as a co-facilitator. Knowing and understanding the limits is important for trust building with the participants but also for ensuring everyone's safety in the group.

As part of setting the stage, you will need to consider the levity or depth of the conversation for everyone (both participants and facilitator) to feel comfortable and safe.

In digital storytelling, we use the traffic light analogy of red, yellow and green light stories. Red light stories are traumatic and emotionally overwhelming ones. Green light stories are light-hearted and do not challenge us to share or look deeply at ourselves - they are comfortable and easy to discuss with strangers. In relation, yellow light stories are in the middle - they do not trigger unresolved traumatic memories in us, but they do challenge us to share something meaningful and honest about our experiences.

In most story circles, we encourage yellow light stories, since it will add depth to the story circle without risking the participants' physical or mental well-being. However, depending on the group dynamic, people may choose to do green light

stories if there is significant time constraints that limit people's ability to have in-depth discussion on the story. Also, green light stories can be used in situations where people are discussing a specific topic that is light hearted in general.

Red light stories should be avoided in group discussions to the best of the facilitator's ability, (unless in the presence of therapeutic professionals). If ever a red light story comes up during the discussion, whether intentionally or unintentionally brought up by facilitator or participant, it is the facilitator's responsibility to assess the situation, and take a break from the discussion if necessary. If the facilitator thinks that they are not able to deal with the situation where people are triggered by traumatic experiences and someone is having an episode of distress, it is recommended to seek external aids; this may be more experienced social workers or healthcare professionals. Thus, it is important to remind participants to honour their boundaries and to caution them about the "overshare hangover". That is, where participants may be moved to share in the moment, yet feel vulnerable and emotionally drained after having left the story circle, potentially with no support. Ensure that participants have resources and information available to take home, such as the Distress Centre Helpline, numbers for support workers at your agency, etc.

In setting the stage for your story circle, consider your audience (how well they may know each other, the level of trust already established within the group, the facilitator's abilities, etc.) before deciding on the levity of the discussion. If the group is new, start with green light stories and assess safety and comfort and boundary limits of participants before moving on to yellow light stories.

SETTING GOALS AND OUTCOMES

Terms to use

Language can be a facilitator or barrier to discussion depending upon if it is used with caution and consideration. It is up to the participants to decide what kind of terms are acceptable during these sensitive discussions. Some people may be sensitive to certain words due to past experiences and personal preferences. Two examples would be the words “queer” or “disability” where some people may find it condescending while some people find it neutral to use in certain circumstances and conversations. Therefore before the start of the conversation, it is recommended to have language check so everyone in the room will be on the same page and try to avoid certain words that may be uncomfortable for others.

Identify Goals & Objectives

Now you're ready to set goals and objectives. Remember to keep the above in mind so that the goals and objectives make a difference.

Here are two examples from our experience of how we took this approach to identify goals and objectives that met the needs of the project as well as the participants needs:

Remember:
You are a change leader.
Take your learnings and
see how to improve.

**Don't let your first session
be your last.**

Case Studies

As part of the project, one of the peer leaders chose to run a story circle for Filipino youth who were identified or allied as/with LGBTQ+. The Peer leader, as the facilitator, wanted to bring this group together to share the digital stories and begin an open conversation about LGBTQ+ newcomer experiences. The youth, largely Catholic, identified their need to discuss their faith in relation to LGBTQ+ identity. The goals and objectives of the session thus became: to create a safe space to discuss LGBTQ+ issues unique to Filipino youth, including reconciling faith with LGBTQ+ identity.

In another case, with a predominantly trans-identified group, the facilitator's initial need was to run a story circle for their community. However, after the first session where participants opened up, it was clear that dysphoric trans participants needed a safe space to discuss intimate topics, such as sexual needs. Some had experiences of violence which projected toward sexual and relational trauma later in life. People experienced a loss of self esteem from being fetishized and objectified. The circle provided a space to mourn the community members whose lives were lost due to systemic oppression and suicide. In order to meet the participants needs, the story circles were required to be structured as a regular group, where participants could deeply get to know each other and develop trust. This led to the development of a community able to heal as a group. The combined needs of the project/facilitator and the participants in this case was: to create a safe space and community for trans-identified participants to increase their confidence, connections, and ability to heal.

Actually naming and writing out the the goals and objectives will go a long way in preparing and implementing your story circle. It ensures that you stay on track. It will also let you know whether your story circle was a success or not for better evaluation. This way you will know what went well and what could be improved on.

Evaluation

Have you accomplished what you set out to do?

How do you know that you will be successful at this story circle before you start? Your evaluation relates closely to your goal and objective. By linking your evaluation to your goals and intentions before you even begin the session; you will be able to clearly see where the gaps may be, or where you may have achieved a positive outcome unintentionally. Link your goals and objectives back into the questions that you are asking through the written and oral evaluation, but be sure to leave opportunities to capture unintended outcomes.

After each story circle, gather feedback from participants, both from an activity or verbal debrief at the end of the session, as well as a written form. One of the benefits of having a post-workshop feedback form is to identify what worked well and what did not work while the experience is fresh, but more importantly, to provide an anonymous approach to receiving honest feedback.

Reflection is important because it gives participants time to think about what they may have learned or gained from the story circle. This will not only deepen their own learning and self-awareness, but will also provide important information to the facilitator. This helps us to continue more successful aspects while making improvements for future circles.

In addition to participant feedback, it is also important for facilitators to reflect on the session. There might be elements that they notice from a different perspective. It is the facilitator's job to identify dynamics within the group; changes in individuals before, during, and at the end of a session, and awareness of self and surroundings. This reflection will further help to improve program plans and facilitation for future sessions and to ensure participants feel supported and safe through the story circle.



*from Marie Ann's Digital Story
'No Different to You and Me'*

CHAPTER 4

PREPARING FOR STORY CIRCLES

In this chapter, we discuss elements to keep in mind when preparing for a story circle.

Outreach and Flyers

Connect, communicate, be clear, honest, and respectful - remember, you're already setting the tone for your story circles

Location and Accessibility

- Location! Location! Location! - make sure it's accessible and welcoming
- Carefully choose a location that works for where your participants are coming from
- Keep in mind the type of story circle you will create and choose the space to match
- Look for a space that is accessible (considering entrances, washrooms and that the space has maneuverability capacity within the halls)
- Ensure that the space is inviting, has appropriate lighting and ample space

Refreshments/Body Breaks

Appropriate food/drinks and information about washrooms, breaks, stretching, etc.



Room Set-Up and Setting the Tone

What is the tone of the story circle? What is the topic? Based on the type of circle that you will be having, set the room up appropriately with chairs, cushions, lighting, etc.

Props

You may choose to include pillows, blankets, or crafts to increase comfort and create a more supportive environment. Sometimes giving people crafts to work on allows for comfort when dealing with heavier subject matter.

Setting a Sacred Space

Before sharing, make sure that the expectations for the circle have been set up. Allow everyone an opportunity to share what they need to feel safe. Make sure that everyone knows that this circle happens within an ARAO (Anti-Racist, Anti-Oppressive) framework.

Outreach and Flyers

Outreach

Who will be attending your group and where might they be coming from? How might they be coming?

We found connecting with other organizations was key - in particular, calling and setting up meetings for staff to get to know you more as a person and more about your program; in case they have clients or participants who could benefit from such a story circle or session. The more human the connections made, the more likely that trust will be achieved and great partnerships can take place. Think about the way that you come across to different organizations, and be informative, authentic and heartfelt.

Leave your poster in visible places and attend events/activities to get you out there talking to the community you want to connect with - whether it's an afterschool club if you're wanting to connect with youth or a curriculum night if you're wanting to connect with parents. If you're wanting to connect with homeless folks, then visit drop-in centres, shelters, or street patrol. Regardless of how you make your first contacts, be authentic. If you connect honestly with someone and they also believe in what you're doing and why you're doing it then they'll tell their friends. The best outreach is word-of-mouth support.

Don't forget to follow-through and stay committed to your word. If you say you'll show up again the following week, then show up. If you say you'll contact them with more information, then contact them.

The more you build relationship and share vision with other organizations and potential participants; the bigger your project becomes and starts to take on a life of its own.

Flyer

When designing your flyer and outreach materials, choose your colours, font and pictures with care. Make sure your materials are readable - from font size to colour contrasts, to simple design, and formatting. According to the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB)'s Clear Print Accessibility Guidelines, readability shouldn't be an afterthought. As such, they recommend certain family fonts (e.g. arial or verdana), certain font sizes (12 to 18 pt), avoiding capitals and italics, certain considerations to colour (e.g. black and white is preferred) and design (e.g. matte or non-glossy and good margins/columns). To access the full guidelines, please visit: <http://www.cnib.ca/en/services/resources/Clearprint/Documents/CNIB%20Clear%20Print%20Guide.pdf>

Opening Doors Since 1980
North York Community House

If you self identify as a member of the GSRM* group, check this out and SIGN UP!

Share your experiences in an intimate story circle within a non-judgemental and safe space.

Perspectives Project

Sunday, Oct. 5
2:00-4:00pm
York Woods Library,
Room 1,
1785 Finch Avenue
West, Toronto, ON
M3N 1M6

Educate,
Empower,
Evolve!

Connect,
bond,
and make
friends!

To learn more
and register:
nychperspectives@gmail.com
416-784-0920 ext. 227

2-hour workshop of
sharing, connecting
and healing.
Light refreshments
will be provided :)

settle thrive lead

United Way Member Agency *GSRM: Gender, Sexual, and Romantic Minorities Ontario

Flyer
Summer 2014

Before printing, get a few differing opinions on how the flyer looks. Target people that you might want to have attend and ask them what their thoughts are. Would they be curious enough about the flyer to want to check out your group? Carefully consider your feedback and make adjustments accordingly.

Keep it fun and informative!

Location and Accessibility

Based on who your participants will be and where they live, consider location and time very carefully - Does it need to be accessible by transit? Does it need to have free parking? Does it need to be during the day? in the evenings? on weekends? Get a feel for where the majority of your participants may be coming from and look for a space that is neutral. Where you are located is important in encouraging participants from your neighbourhood or communities.

Make sure that your location reflects an accessible space so that when you outreach, your participants feel welcome and safe. This information can be included on your flyer as well as how to access additional information. For example, it will be important for you as the facilitator to be well aware of key information such as elevators, automatic-doors, main entrances, washrooms, evacuation procedures, and other technologies to accommodate assistive devices or to welcome diverse gender identities. Be aware of how you might feel the first time that you are commuting to the space and identify distinct locators. Put yourself in the position of the people that you envision coming to your session so that you can be most helpful. Precise descriptions will be key in reducing anxiety for participants around coming to a new place to engage in what might be new territory.

Be clear about where your participants may need to be dropped off or picked-up if they are travelling by accessible transit service for people with disabilities (such as Wheel-Trans). That is, it's not enough to simply notify them that the program will take place in an agency in a mall. Malls often have multiple entrances and some are located closer to the elevator or may only have stair access ways. If your participant is travelling by Wheel-Trans, they will need to be able to convey clear meeting points for pick-up, or risk missing their ride.

Other accessible needs to consider for your story circle may be the need for a translator - perhaps for a certain language (e.g. Urdu or Vietnamese) or a certain sign language (e.g. American Sign Language (ASL) or Indian Sign Language (ISL), etc). If translation is needed, ensure you have resources and space both within your budget but also within the program design and implementation. Make sure sufficient time is allocated for translation and that translators are given appropriate information prior to the session - both about the content of the session as well as any participant's needs. Include this info in the flyer and suggest that contact is made to further discuss these special arrangements.

Does the participant require a support worker? If so, at what point should they meet, and where? Will the participant identify their own support worker that they have trained or worked with in the past? Again, consider both the resources and space needed to accommodate the need for a support worker. Do you have enough chairs set-up to include space for the support worker in the circle. Will your program pay for the support worker's time? Will your program pay for transit needed for both the participant and support worker? If not, be sure to discuss this openly with your participant to try to identify solutions together.

PREPARING FOR STORY CIRCLES

Once in your space, make a note of elements that add to/detract from the experience. For example, if your space only has large fluorescent lighting overhead and you have participants that can be triggered by this kind of lighting, then consider bringing in lamps, using natural lighting from open windows, or possibly even candles. Another example, could be identifying another room for participants who may need time alone or in private (to collect their thoughts, as a prayer room, for supportive counselling, etc). Or, simply putting up signs to show you're thinking about their needs - for example, signs in first language or signs directing folks to gender-neutral washrooms.

By being aware of your participant's special needs through asking questions and encouraging openness; you can create a space that is both welcoming and safe for your participants. This setting will foster an experience that makes a lasting impact.

Disclaimer

We know that we don't always get the perfect spaces and resources, but basically the most important thing is to keep communication open

and be approachable and communicative with participants that you are working with. Give your participants the option to strategize on solutions together with you.

Refreshments/Body Breaks

Work within your budget to provide a nutritious snack. Decide whether food will be a focus or a 'nice to have' and make time for it appropriately. For example, will the participants be coming and preparing their meal together as they share stories or is it simply a snack that is set out through the evening? Will you break for the snack to give participants a 'lighter' time from 'heavy' story circle discussions? Keep set-up and cleanup in mind - do you have access to a kitchen and washing facilities?

Finger foods like crackers, fruit, veggies, and cheese work well. Keep in mind the dietary needs of your participants if they are not bringing their own snack. Even some brown bag lunches need to be safe for others to be in the same space with, as some may be allergic in the presence of certain foods like nuts.



from Nanditha's Digital Story 'Disadvantage to Advantage'

It is ideal to have participants identify any food allergies to the facilitator at time of registration so the facilitator can ensure safety for participants, as much as possible.

Body Breaks are important for people to know that they have freedom to move and not feel trapped. Heavy topics can create a somatic weight that may need to be released. Give your participants flexibility - whether this means using the washroom whenever they need to go or going out for air. It is important for participants to know they can leave the room, if needed, and to remind them that they are in charge of their own self-care, even if that means asking for help.

Room Set-Up and Setting the Tone

How you set up the room sets the tone for the style of the session. Be aware and intentional as you create your agenda.

What type of feeling are you trying to create as you plan your session? If you would like more of a circle where there is a sense of unity, consider setting up seats in a circle. If you are sharing a fair amount of new knowledge and participants will likely be taking notes, you may need to consider desks and tables for the participants to write on. If you are having a guest speaker that may take questions consider setting the room up in a lecture style. If you are trying to create an intimate, comfortable setting, maybe you do away with chairs and consider having participants sitting on the floor (if all are able) or on couches.

If there will be both a presentation and a conversation group, consider your space. Would it be easy to move the seats? If not, find a comfortable balance before you begin. (Best to have at least a mental picture before the day)

Let your participant know what they can expect during their time with you. Refer them to the outline/ agenda for your time together as an anchor and also to set the tone of organization. Having a structure will help in ensuring a psychological feeling of containment and safety.

Props

Facilitators can sometimes overshare, especially when in the presence of “quiet” participants, trying hard to “fill the gap.” It is better to find alternative ways of expression for those individuals who prefer not to talk openly about their thoughts, or who may not yet be prepared to elaborate their feelings. Having markers, pencils, sketchpads, mural paper, playdoh, or other tools for drawing, writing, or free expression is essential for individuals who feel anxious around other people but still wish to express their feelings.



*‘Concerning a Narrative of Pain’,
Participant artwork*

PREPARING FOR STORY CIRCLES

Decide if you want warm and cozy, or a more formal atmosphere. Props that can be used to create a warmer, more cozy environment include blankets, pillows, and candles (where permitted). Other props to make the space more inviting or 'familiar' could include posters, art, or traditional textiles.

Consider calming colors like green, blue and brown to balance potential heavy subject matter. Red and purple are known as being more aggressive and heated colours.

Other props could be used for very functional purposes of the session - whether the item is used as a 'talking stick' to focus attention on individual speaking time, or other pictures/personal items to prompt and connect through personal stories. In other cases, flowcharts or other visual (including powerpoint slides) or audio aids (such as music) can help to enhance the objective or tone of the session. Being creative and letting additional aids support your session will provide both levity and grounding for otherwise weighted topics.

Setting a Sacred Space

Setting group norms/setting a sacred space/environment means encouraging thoughts and experiences as real and relevant under the umbrella of acceptance and non-judgement of all. In order to do this effectively, we believe ground rules are important in each story circle to ensure everyone's well-being and feeling of security in the space provided. Regardless of whether participants know each other or not, it is important to start the circle by establishing rules all participants in the group can agree to. One ground rule that we recommend for any session is to make sure each person has time to share, if they wish to. This ensures respect and fairness among participants.

Include in your session:

- Confidentiality (nothing that is shared in the room should leave the room/if you feel like you need to share an experience, be sure not to use names, etc.)
- Encouragement
- Consent for any kind of touching
- All emotions are valid
- If you are feeling overwhelmed, you can leave the room to take a break (signals if you would like a facilitator to check in with you)
- Patience
- Respect

Step in to moderate an unacceptable red light comment, provide warnings. Consider setting up protocols to limit the use of smart devices (also a privacy concern) while providing pen and paper for participants to buffer their thoughts.



The following is a sample guideline for establishing rules of respect/group norms/sacred space in a story circle.

Have people introduce themselves, how they would like to be addressed (e.g. if they would like to state their pronouns and explain why it's important to not assume gender based on how someone may look/act/sound etc.) Note how we use just "pronouns" instead of "preferred pronouns", as to refrain from suggesting that there is an original pronoun. While in many LGBTQ+ centered spaces it is common practice to ask for pronouns as folks introduce themselves, it can be cause problems for a participant who is not out. Gauge the group, see if they know each other, and their reception of non-binary gender issues. Pronouns may change throughout the story circles, so use your best judgement.

Do an ice-breaker that will help you learn something deeper about participants For example:

- what's one thing you've done today you're proud of?
- if you could know one thing about your future, what would it be?

Try to encourage them to think outside the box with their answers and prompt them to go further with their answers.

Introduce the idea of a safer space/Group Norms, and what they need as individuals to feel comfortable in the circle. Make a physical chart, drawing, or list where the rules/guidelines to be set out so that participants and yourself can refer to it. Make sure that the writing and placement of the paper will allow everyone to see it clearly for the entire time that you're together. Make sure that everyone knows that this circle happens within an ARAO (Anti-Racist, Anti-Oppressive) framework. Share the expectations of an anti-oppressive framework.

Open the floor and encourage people to add their rules. Make sure that everyone has a chance to contribute. You can do this by going around in a circle and having suggestions to start the conversation off with.

Go over your list with the group. Confirm with participants that everyone agrees to uphold the values of the guidelines during the session.

Encourage "everything's a remix" and challenge participants to delve into other's world; to take a humble approach to learn from each other and work toward community building.

Remind participants they are in charge of their own self-care, even if that means asking for help.

CHAPTER 5

FACILITATOR TIPS

This chapter compiles a list of tips that our facilitators find beneficial in their practices.

Breathe and Move

Let your participants know that they are free to leave for a moment, and stretch and move to limbically release intense emotion. Encourage self and body awareness for triggers living in the body.

Tone and Pacing

Understand that a facilitator's pitch and tempo can affect the group's feelings of peace or anxiety.

Listen, Observe and Actively Encourage

Provide a safe space by reading between the lines on what is needed in your group.

Boundaries

Establish concrete boundaries for the protection of yourself and peers.



Breathe and Move

If a red light story does surface and become heated, reinforce breathing in for a count of 4 and then out for a count of 4 to calm the heart rate and nervous system of the group.

Encourage getting up and stretching as participant sharing and emotional conversation can manifest in physical tension and stress. Bring your group back into their bodies with stretch and breath routines that are simple to follow. Encourage bathroom and water breaks for those who need to move more and may feel trapped in the room with the potential weight of the conversation.

Address your participants by name, maintain eye contact with whomever is speaking, and distribute eye contact with all participants across the room when speaking. Little things like this provide the personal touch, and help participants feel a sense of belonging.

Tone and Pacing

Calm, slow and steady speech that is non-condescending, relatable and genuine. While being natural, be aware of your own feelings of stress from the day and how that may affect your presentation.

Listen, Observe, Actively Encourage

Active Listening

Identifying key issues remains a good part of our work, and this is achieved through being a good listener. Much of the work is listening to people's struggles and needs. To truly listen to what is being said, we must be present to what is being said. This means turning off, to the best of our ability, other thoughts and help to keep the speaker as

focussed and guided as possible. We do this by understanding that sharing can often feel quite vulnerable. There is an act of being vulnerable ourselves that is inherent in listening. We must feel safe, calm and willing to be accepting. We must also trust ourselves that even if something that is said may be unknown territory and challenging; through questions and openness we can make it through. Often lending an ear of non judgement can be the greatest gift that we can give one another.

Observation/Intervention (Watching for body language among participants)

If someone looks uncomfortable take an opportunity to check in with eye contact, or privately/ verbally. If this is not possible and your intuition suggests that the topic is a trigger, you can ask a question that diverts the topic elsewhere, or ask to speak with the person outside for a moment.

Encouraging a space for equal opportunity sharing

Be aware of extroversion and introversion allowing both to be heard. For example, by passing of the "talking stick"; asking questions specifically of people who have not yet had a chance to speak to see if once they have the floor, they flourish; and/or inviting anyone who has not spoken yet so share their thoughts.

Animate discussion (some suggested questions to invite further participation):

- What do you think about that?
- How did that make you feel? Why?
- Has anyone ever experienced anything like that before?
- How might you have responded to that situation?
- Does anyone want to share a similar or different experience?

Boundaries

Establish concrete boundaries for the protection of yourself and peers. Boundaries carry significant gravity due to the intimate nature of story circles, and the vulnerability of exposing something personal, or perhaps being triggered by an unresolved issue.

You are the one who shares first. Be aware of your own emotional capacity, so that the story told will be convincing and can effectively resonate with your audiences.

“One cannot pour from an empty cup”. Facilitators need to ensure physical and emotional well-being before attending to participants’ needs. To value the participants’ needs, facilitator self care is priority.

Know what you can handle and what you need to refer to the experts, especially in the case of one-on-one follow-up with participants following a session is important. Referrals are sometimes necessary. Having said that, remember that you may be the first line of support for your participant so making a referral involves checking in and following-up with your participant to ensure they are getting the support they need from that referral. As this is a community building practice, facilitators will inevitably become part of the circle. Developing stronger and trusting relationships, as part of the circle, will support individuals and the group as a whole.

Consent/Confidentiality

If at any point a peer leader is to convey a need that may involve information from the confidential group, one must first obtain explicit consent and preferably a signed consent for proof and protection. Care should be taken so that the information is to remain anonymous, generalized to remove identifying information, so that it cannot

be traced back to an individual. Sometimes it may be preferable if staff is to refrain from recognizing or approaching participants outside of the group setting, as to protect your client’s confidentiality.

Involve your participants as advocates for their community, but refrain from exposing potentially vulnerable participants, who risk harassment, loss of employment and housing, hate crimes and death from exposure.

Things to keep in mind:

Reinforce your Ground Rules and Group Norms often as a point of reference and an anchor. When someone spirals out of the boundaries, bring the group (and their) awareness back to the agreements that were made at the beginning of the session.

Encourage your group to be aware of their bodies by locating where they feel the trigger in their body. If they can locate it, breathe through it and locate a part of their body that feels well, or a positive person or memory; It can start to calm the nervous system and enhance centering. If it is a recurring group, you might want to consider a few mins of meditation to heighten self awareness within the group.

If you are co-facilitating the session, you may agree that one of you can step outside with the person in need of further attention to provide a safe space for both them and the other members of the group.

Encourage your group to own their feelings using terms like “I feel angry because the topic of such-and-such is a trigger for me...” rather than “You made me angry because of the way that you said what you did....”

Story Circle Outline #1

Sample

7-7:15 PM

Arrival and Snack:

As participants arrive, encourage them to be on time and have a drink and snack so that they have become comfortable and adapted to the space prior to coming into circle.

If you know some participants, greet them while making an effort to introduce them to newcomers to the group.

7:20 -7:35

Ice breaker/Introductions of both group and facilitator(s) (10 – 15 minutes depending on group size):

- We are going on a picnic; what would you bring and why?
- If you were an animal what type of animal would you be and why?

Make sure that your ice breaker is light and fun but also gives each attendant the capacity to get to know each other and bond.

7:40-7:55

- Setting group norms/Safe space practices (15 minutes)
- Get out a marker/chalk and write down what each person needs in the group to feel safe. Go over the ones that have been said several times, encourage some elaboration. Keep this somewhere that is visible throughout the session so that it can be referenced when group is in need of grounding/anchoring

8:00-8:30

- Showing of first Digital Story and conversation (30 minutes total)
- show video (5 mins)
- Discussion (What are your first thoughts/reactions to the story told? Is there anything in this story that you can relate to? Etc.) (20 minutes)
- Break (5-10 minutes)

8:30-9PM

- Showing of second Digital Story and conversation (5 minutes)
- Discussion (15 minutes)
- Debrief activity/discussion about both stories/themes touched upon in previous discussions (5 minutes)
- Concluding thoughts (5 mins) (information for future session, contact information if they need someone to talk to, thank you's for joining in) and evaluation forms

Story Circle Sample Outline #2

LGBTQ+ Art Session

7:00 -7:15

- Introduction to what story circles are and agenda for the day
- Talking about pronouns and the importance of respecting each other's identities/ expressions in the group and otherwise (10-15 minutes)

7:15-7:30

Ice breaker/Introduction of both group and facilitator(s) (10-15 minutes depending on group size):

- What was your favourite part of your day?

7:30-7:40

- Setting group norms/Safe space practices (10 minutes)
- Have everyone write down on pieces of small scrap paper and put into a hat and then have each person draw a title and read it for the group

7:40:8:10

- Digital story and Art
- Showing of first Digital Story (5 minutes)
- Art activity – Show how this video made you feel through a drawing/painting/craft (depending on supplies available (20 minutes)

Break (5-10 minutes)

8:20-9:00 PM

Discussion, stretching and wind down

- Sharing of pieces and discussion of video (20 minutes)
- Wind down activity (deep breaths, stretches, etc.) (10 minutes)
- Final debrief (10 minutes)
- Concluding thoughts (information for future session, contact information if they need someone to talk to, thank you's for joining in) and evaluation forms







GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Able-bodied

Able-bodied/abled privilege refers to the numerous benefits—some hidden, many not—that many societies and cultures accord to able-bodied and/or abled people.

Definition from Annaham (2009). Disability 101: What is Able-Bodied or Able Privilege?
<http://disabledfeminists.com/2009/11/20/disability-101-what-is-able-bodied-or-abled-privilege/>

Asexual

A person who does not typically feel a notable amount of sexual attraction toward any person, regardless of sex or gender identity. Asexual people may still feel romantic attraction toward individuals of one or more genders, often identify with a particular romantic orientation, and often do form intimate emotional partnerships. Asexuality itself is a spectrum. Those who experience a very minimal amount of sexual attraction, or only under very specific circumstances, may identify as demisexual or greysexual.

The definitions above are from OCASI's Positive Space Initiative CNIB Guideline. \

Bisexual

A person who is sexually or romantically attracted to two genders (for example, to both women and men). A bisexual person may or may not experience equal levels of attraction to both genders, and this attraction (like any sexuality) can be fluid over time. A related term is pansexual, which refers to a person who is sexually or romantically attracted to three or more genders.

Colonialism

Usually refers to the period of European colonization from Columbus (1492) onwards, in the Americas, Asia and Africa, and taking on different forms from settler colonies like Canada to non-settler colonies such as India during British rule. Colonialism differs also across colonizing nations and across time. For example, French colonialism had different policies from British colonialism.

Definition from Canadian Race Relations Foundation (2015)

Cultural genocide

Cultural genocide is the destruction of those structures and practices that allow the group to continue as a group. States that engage in cultural genocide set out to destroy the political and social institutions of the targeted group. Land is seized, and populations are forcibly transferred and their movement is restricted. Languages are banned. Spiritual leaders are persecuted, spiritual practices are forbidden, and objects of spiritual value are confiscated and destroyed. And, most significantly to the issue at hand, families are disrupted to prevent the transmission of cultural values and identity from one generation to the next.

Definition from Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015)

Gay

A male (anyone who identifies as male) who is sexually or romantically attracted, either primarily or exclusively, to other males. Other LGBTQ+ people, such as lesbians, may also self-identify as gay. Gay has historically been used as an umbrella term for LGBTQ+ people in general.

Gender Identity

One's innate sense, understanding, and experience of one's own gender, whether it be femaleness, maleness, a mix of the two, or something else entirely. Gender identity does not necessarily have anything to do with physical sex characteristics. Trans, bi-gender, hijra, muxe, sworn virgin, third gender, and sometimes two-spirit are all terms related to gender identity.

GSRM

Gender, sexuality, and romantic minorities this is a more inclusive term to describe what is generally known as LGBTQ+

Intersex

This is an umbrella term for a variety of conditions that a person can be born with, involving a sexual or reproductive anatomy that society has trouble labeling as either definitively male or definitively female. A person labeled with an intersex condition has a combination of sex characteristics (for example external genitalia, internal reproductive organs, and/or chromosomes), some of which are typically labelled as female, some of which are typically labelled as male, and/or some of which appear to be somewhere in between. This was previously known as "hermaphrodite;" however, the term "hermaphrodite" is considered offensive and should not be applied to humans.

Lesbian

A female (anyone who identifies as female) who is sexually or romantically attracted, either primarily or exclusively, to other females.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

LGBTQ+

This is an abbreviated acronym that refers to the entire spectrum of gender (beyond cisgender) and sexuality (beyond heterosexual). L = Lesbian, G = Gay, B = Bisexual, T = Trans / Transgender / Transsexual / Two-Spirit, Q = Queer / Questioning, + = Asexual / Intersex / Pansexual / etc. The acronym is sometimes written in the longer form of “LGBT2SIQQA” or similar, but even the longer forms cannot list every possible identity, which is why the + is important.

Medical Exam

Medical exam includes, physical examination; mental examination; review of past medical history; laboratory tests; diagnostic tests; and/or medical assessment applicants records.

Queer

Historically used as a pejorative term, queer has largely been reclaimed as an umbrella term or self-identification by and for people with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. It is a popular option for self-identification because its meaning is not fixed or specific, thus one is not required to fit one’s identity into a pre-determined box. Keep in mind that some people may still take offence to the term, however, so use it with caution. As always, ask people how they self-identify, and use whatever term is preferred by the person in question.

Questioning

A state of questioning, exploring, or being unsure about one’s sexual orientation or gender identity.

Sacred space

A sacred place is first of all a defined place, a space distinguished from other spaces. The rituals that a people either practice at a place or direct toward it mark its sacredness and differentiate it from other defined spaces.

Definition from <http://www.encyclopedia.com/article-1G2-3424502693/sacred-space.html>

Settler society

A theoretical term that describes a common link between modern, predominantly European, attempts to permanently settle in other areas of the world. It is used to distinguish settler colonies from resource extraction colonies.

Definition from Razack, S. (2002). *Razack Race, space, and the law: Unmapping a white settler society* Toronto, Ontario: Between the Lines.

Systemic Discrimination

The institutionalization of discrimination through policies and practices which may appear neutral on the surface but which have an exclusionary impact on particular groups, such that various minority groups are discriminated against, intentionally or unintentionally. This occurs in institutions and organizations where the policies, practices and procedures (e.g. employment systems – job requirements, hiring practices, promotion procedures, etc.) exclude and/or act as barriers to racialized groups. Systemic discrimination may also result from some government laws and regulations.

Definition from Canadian Race Relations Foundation (2015)

Talking Stick

The talking stick, also called a speaker's staff, is an instrument of aboriginal democracy used by many tribes, especially those of indigenous peoples of the Northwest Coast of North America. The talking stick may be passed around a group or used only by leaders as a symbol of their authority and right to speak in public.

Definition from https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talking_stick

Two Spirit

This is an umbrella term that seeks to encompass a wide variety of sexually and gender diverse identity concepts from numerous North American Indigenous cultures and languages. The word “two-spirit” is derived from the concept of having both a male and a female spirit. Many of the cultures traditionally recognized the existence of a third gender, and/or conceptualized gender in a way that is completely different from dominant Euro- North American society. In many Indigenous cultures, two-spirit people have historically been valued and revered for their unique gifts, and have held special roles in the community, including social, religious, and ceremonial duties. Some sexually and gender diverse Indigenous people may prefer to identify with a specific concept within their own culture and language, rather than by the umbrella term “two-spirit.”

Trans

A person who self-identifies with a gender other than the one assigned at birth. This is both an abbreviation / umbrella term (for transgender, transsexual, trans man, trans woman) and a stand-alone term.

White

Social colour. The term is used to refer to people belonging to the majority group in Canada. It is recognized that there are many different people who are “White” but who face discrimination because of their class, gender, ethnicity, religion, age, language, or geographical origin. Grouping these people as “White” is not to deny the very real forms of discrimination that people of certain ancestry, such as Italian, Portuguese, Jewish, Armenian, Greek, etc., face because of these factors.

Definition from Canadian Race Relations Foundation (2015)

Xenophobia

Dislike or fear of people from other countries.



“

**But the strength of our love will
take on this world and all the
problems they've caused us...**

”



<https://youtu.be/S53t-8gd3T8>
Scan code to watch on YouTube

Cherese:

If That's What it Takes

What do your friends mean to you?

What have your friends done for you?
A free joint? Some company to have a beer? Cost you a percentage of your money every weekend?

Friendship is you never wanting me to hurt. Friendship is me never wanting you to hurt - forever.

I remember a living friendship before. Remember my one-handed sister? She never allowed me not to smile. That story she told me; trying to make me laugh about the time when she was kidnapped, taken to a field, beaten, and they chopped off her hand.

Or the time when she brought a group of people and threatened to burn down the police station if they did not let me go.

I came from a huge family my mother had 18 brothers and sisters. I had more than a hundred cousins on that side of my family alone.

Today, not a single one of them I talk to; not a single one of them is my friend. One friend was more worth more than hundreds of relatives.

Oh, but the world has never seen a force like us; a friendship like us; humans like what we were when we were together, because being with her made everything good. I only realize now that there were very few good times in my life.

Friendship: I'd much rather be with her in bad times than be without her in good times. With us, no problem was a problem. The queer experience, discrimination, violence, hunger, rape, war, alcohol, poverty, vandalism, drugs, sex, none we're a match for a friendship like ours. We loved each other, we cared, and so because of that, the world became a different place.

My hope, my prayer, is that everyone could experience friendship the way we did; experience what can happen when humans care for each other. With her, there was nothing I couldn't take on; and now she's joined the list of millions of women in the world who've mysteriously gone missing.

But the strength of our love will take on this world and all the problems they've caused us as long as there's life in my body. For I have received the greatest gift of life...friendship.



“

**I thought there was something
wrong with me because
I never fit in.**

”



<https://youtu.be/Wno747Elr3c>
Scan code to watch on YouTube

Erin:

Becoming Me

In my early childhood, I was a happy kid. I played soccer, I was social, I dressed how I wanted; did the things I enjoyed and no one questioned who I was. As I got older, I realized that life wasn't as simple as people made it seem. I enjoyed sports, video games, dressed and presented more masculinely. For me, it wasn't about male, female, gay, or straight. It was about how I feel comfortable.

This created a separation between myself and my peers.

I thought there was something wrong with me because I never fit in. The only thing that felt worse than being ostracized by the people in my life was being something I was not. In grade 11, I met my best friend John. John was out, and proud of who he was. And with his support, I began to discover who I was.

He began introducing me to his friends and bringing me to LGBTQ youth groups and these people became my chosen family. With John's friends, I felt as though I belonged and as though there was a space for me to grow into myself.

During this time, my home life turned into chaos. My parents began going through what would become a nasty

divorce. Things at home became so stressful that I began to avoid my parents and the place I was supposed to call home. I also became fearful of telling my parents about the person I had discovered within myself. Who needed the pressure of knowing that their kid was a queer? I spent more and more time with my friends and they became my main support system.

By being myself, more amazing people were being attracted into my life.

In grade 12, my friends and I started the first ever gay straight alliance at our catholic high school. We wanted to create a space within our school for other students to feel safe and be themselves. Through my experiences with my friends and through creating the GSA, I discovered that I don't need to fit in. I need to start creating space for myself and for others; that there are things in my life I cannot change – like who I'm related to, or that my parents are no longer together. But there are things that are well within my power to change – like who I allow into my life and how I spend my time and energy.

I learned to love my life and who I am, unconditionally, and for that I am forever grateful.



“

**Yet, why am I being persecuted
for being different?**

”



<https://youtu.be/n8IYIxs2qUQ>
Scan code to watch on YouTube

Jase:

The Wake that Woke Me Up

I could have been dead that night. We were supposed to go to a wake. My brother and I were to pay respect to a death. What little did we know that our death would follow. He was killed that night on our way back home.

Bruised.
Battered.
Beaten.
Trapped.
And chopped several times in the back of his head.

Many things happened that night that stopped me from accompanying him. I could have been dead too. But fate decided otherwise.

Words fall short for how I felt when I saw his lifeless body. There was a pool of blood. His body was cold and stiff, yet there was a smile on his face. I felt cold and stiff. We're still not sure who killed him. His struggles ended but mine continued. He was killed; and I was next.

And fear always haunted me.

For my safety, I had to continuously move. I didn't understand. Should a human be killed for being different? Should that same person be killed for being gay? I look all around me and I see that everyone is different.

Yet, why am I being persecuted for being different?

I search for escapism from Bahamas, Cayman Islands, Trinidad and Tobago, and Barbados. I didn't want to be hacked into pieces, like a butcher prepares his meat. I moved to Canada. I found peace.

And through these struggles, I have remembered my brother's smile while in his pool of blood. And that has given me the courage to continue to smile.

The storm isn't over. But once there's life, there's time to heal this broken vessel.

Dedicated in loving memory of my brother: Wayne Davy



“

I couldn't eat.

I barely left the bed.

I lost over 70 pounds, my job,

and most of my friends.

”



<https://youtu.be/q7UGWao131c>
Scan code to watch on YouTube

June:

My Best Worst Decision

What I first thought was the flu became the darkest time in my life.

I couldn't eat.

I barely left the bed.

I lost over 70 pounds, my job, and most of my friends.

I failed out of my classes and became incredibly depressed. I felt like I was barely existing, not even close to living. I had no motivation; no reason to keep putting in effort if all that was left was pain.

That was when I saw his picture online.

At first he sounded too good to be true. I talked to everyone I knew about taking him in. My parents, my cousin, my doctor - all thought that it was a terrible idea. They said I barely could afford to survive as it was, that I couldn't get out of bed to take care of myself; how could I take care of anyone else?

None of that mattered to me. And, I drove out to meet him anyways. The trip out from Toronto to St. Catherines was a complete disaster – there was construction and traffic was horrible.

My GPS took me in the wrong direction for over an hour and then died leaving me entirely lost in a strange city.

When I finally got there I was hours late, sick to my stomach and tired. But he sees me and he runs out the door to meet me.

His face. His pure happiness; pure love, acceptance and warmth.

He runs up and licks my face and everything melts away.

All the pain and the hurt – it all seems ok. I feel like I can move forward and I did. I adopted him the next day.

Wally became my motivation – my reason to get out of bed. Because of him, I had to go outside, even for just five minutes. But, I had to. His energy became my medication. His excitement is what made me better. With his help, day by day, I learned to cope. He showed me what one living being can do for another. What we can do for each other and what you can do for the people in your life. You can save a life like Wally saved mine.



“

**I felt really broken and sat alone
with my tears.**

”



https://youtu.be/lf_dBiOYy84
Scan code to watch on YouTube

Nanditha:

Disadvantage to Advantage

When I was a child I faced lots of difficulties. I had no idea where I was or what I was doing. No one could see me.

I wasn't like other children because I started to talk at a really late age. I was always quiet, shy, nervous and anxious. Sometimes I would talk to myself. I used to get into the habit of staring at others.

I had so many fears, like the sudden erupting sound of the grinder, the rough tracks of the train, the surprising flush of an automatic toilet, and the booming of thunder.

I used to do a lot of hand symbols at the sky. If it rained, I would give the sky thumbs down. If it was sunny I'd give the sky thumbs up.

I was repetitive in my speech and people noticed, so I went to a Psychiatrist and I was diagnosed with high functioning Autism.

Up to now, my family is always seriously concerned.

In school, I did not have any energy or strength. I was bullied with words like 'retard' and 'ugly face'.

I felt really broken and sat alone with my tears.

I never wanted to go to school again! However, I still continued because my studies allowed me to succeed and go further. When I went to College things got a lot better.

At the age of 22, I had the most severe anxiety attacks that caused excessive swallowing and nausea.

I felt depressed, alone and my crying led to attempted suicide. After a year I went to the psychiatrist and they treated me with medication.

Music and performing became my happiness. Reiki and meditation created calmness, and my body and soul become stronger!

Today I'm happier, confident and focused on who I am now!



“

**...but it was depression
that almost changed all
of our lives.**

”



<https://youtu.be/6tkdARfECtg>
Scan code to watch on YouTube

Nicole:

A Conversation

There's a couple of moments from my childhood that I can remember clearly:

Picking mint leaves from the garden and sitting down for tea with my abuelita; Sleeping in a tent at my tata's farm; Hugging my dad goodbye as we left for Canada;

But there's also a presence, not only in my childhood, but throughout my whole life and into my present day. My mom, my mama, has been my best friend ever since I was a little girl. She's been my rock and my support; she's been there for me from the time I dyed my hair pink to when university had me on the constant verge of a panic attack.

She's kind, and intelligent, and so hardworking.

She's the strongest person I know.

And sometime during the first few years we lived in Canada, she tried to commit suicide.

Depression isn't unknown in our family, mental health issues (in general) from schizophrenia to bipolar disorder are things we know on an intimate level, but it was depression that almost changed all of our lives.

I don't remember the details; I was too young at that exact moment for anyone to feel comfortable telling me anything beyond the fact that she was in the hospital. But at some point I learned the truth; she had taken too many sleeping pills on the job, the same ones she still sometimes takes to this day to help her rest. We haven't talked about it, although I hope that one day we will.

But I am thankful every day that she's with me. This amazing person who waits every night for a kiss on the cheek so that she knows I'm home and safe is still with me. She survived that day; and she's kept surviving.

She's the strongest person I know.



“

**With him beside me,
I no longer felt like
a freak, misfit, or alone.**

”



<https://youtu.be/Fi2yN58ETPw>
Scan code to watch on YouTube

Rachel:

Children Gather ‘Round

He walked beside me; his presence completing mine.

He was my first love and my grandfather. With him beside me, I no longer felt like a freak, misfit, or alone. He didn't know my pain but somehow, he knew exactly how to soothe it. He knew all of the names of my stuffed animals and often asked me how they were. He kept an eye on my joy and pain through theirs.

Everything else around me at that time made little sense. Little girls scribbling “that’s your face!” seemed alien to me when my best friend was so further in age and peace. I stuck to myself amongst relentless family drama.

The only place I felt there was for me was in grandpop’s presence – and through grandpop’s sight.

When he passed away, I felt my advocate was gone. I was eight and in despair and in confusion.

One day, I heard the mean kids calling children with Down’s Syndrome and physical disabilities “retarded”. I didn’t know what I was saying or the force that was arising in me but I managed to yell back, “Chad’s not retarded! You are!” My advocacy for him made us instant friends. And, it is from these new friends that I once again felt that pure love I felt from my grandfather. I learnt that the “gung gung” that Chad repeated; the “gung gung” meant “I love you”.

I attended Etobicoke School of the Arts and wrote a plenitude of songs about finding our way out of the darkness – staying inspired about who we are. I then attended Wilfred Laurier University studying music.

Now, I dedicate my life to hearing and helping bring about the beauty in each and every voice, emotionally, mentally, physically, and spiritually. I do this through teaching, song writing, friendship and story.



“

I felt as if nothing I did was right.

My walk was wrong.

My laugh was wrong.

My voice was wrong.

”



<https://youtu.be/wQDxz7MSUtg>
Scan code to watch on YouTube

Rodney:

Still in Motion

I was born in the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

From the age of 3, I can remember that my parents, grandparents, and cousins would tell me that I was ugly, useless, worthless, retarded, girlish and even a mistake.

I felt as if nothing I did was right.
My walk was wrong.
My laugh was wrong.
My voice was wrong.

I began to feel as if I was wrong. I had no sense of belonging. I felt as if I was not relevant, needed, or even wanted. By the age of 9 my suicide attempts began. I would try holding my breath – try hard to suffocate myself to death. I even tried to starve myself to death but couldn't find the will to go through with it.

It wasn't until I was 13 years old in secondary school that I learned about a world outside of mine. I learned it was possible to escape this arduous and immense pain. My golden ticket out of my misery was now my education.

As for the years that followed, I had to work hard to gain that golden ticket. This was my chance; my only chance to find a new land and make a life for myself.

Eventually, after 7 long tedious years of hard work and studying, I finally did it. I earned my golden ticket and made it out, from Trinidad to Grenada, then eventually Canada.

Although, I have been scarred greatly throughout my childhood and adolescent years; in time, I began to realize that I'm not only resilient but an amazing individual. The journey of escaping the many pains of my earlier years have been extremely labourious. But through self-discovery, I am learning that I am greater than I think.

Honey, the sky is not my limit. I'm not one in a million or one in a billion. I am a very rare and exquisite commodity.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS



JOAN
PEER LEADER

Joan started at the the Perspectives Project as a volunteer, then stepped up to be a peer leader as the project expanded in scale. Bringing her unique perspective as a non-binary person and neurodiversity from the autistic spectrum, she paid extra attention to crafting a mad-positive space in addition to the project's original GSRM focus.

As a social movement activist, Joan participates energetically in various non-profit initiatives with a keen focus on event curation and facilitation. Also a crazy cat lover and an excellent cook, Joan has utilized her culinary skills to provide great food and comfort to her friends, colleagues, and participants to the Perspective Project, which always lightened them up in frigid Canadian winter.



NICOLE
PEER LEADER

Nicole began at North York Community House as a placement student and was excited to be given the chance to stay on as a peer leader in the Perspectives Project. Her lived experiences as a queer, immigrant, latina youth have helped her create circles where sharing and thinking critically is encouraged.

A recent graduate of Social Work from Ryerson University, Nicole has devoted much of her time for equity-seeking initiatives and groups. Outside of her work, she is a music enthusiast and bookworm. But for every aspect of her life, she thanks her mother for all the opportunities and love she has given her.



PHOENIX
PEER LEADER

Phoenix is a peer leader at the Perspectives Project. As a newcomer herself, she joined the team hoping to help other newcomer youths to achieve a smooth transition when settling in a new environment. She enjoys seeing participants open up to new experiences and express themselves through different media during the story circle. Her favorite part of being a peer leader is hearing a variety of life stories from other people and learning something new from each one of them.

She is also passionate about event facilitation, planning and graphic design, and she learned valuable lessons working on the project. She is grateful to have the opportunity to share what she learned throughout the journey with everyone that may encounter this kit.



RACHEL
PERSPECTIVES PROJECT LEAD

Rachel has coordinated the Perspectives Project with a passion for community, equity, and learning through sharing. She is strongly committed to ability and difference and has used her Cognitive Behaviour Therapy Certification, Music and English Degrees, and Certification as a Life Coach to support individuals and groups in bringing out their best selves. She uses different skills and techniques such as her certification as a Kripalu Yoga teacher for individuals with special needs and her training in expressive movement and teaching of music, song, and story to encourage and support her diverse participants and the peer leaders of this project.

She continues to embark on new artistic endeavours and is currently supporting a new community-based choir encouraging newcomers, more established Canadians, and recently-arrived Syrian refugees to come together, develop their English and build a new network of friends through music.



ABOUT OUR PARTNERS



CHAVON

OCASI, Accessibility Initiative Coordinator

Chavon Niles is a Doctoral Candidate at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. Her scholarly interest includes education as a social determinant of health, immigrant youth, disabilities, community and academic partnerships, and other social justice and equity issues within education.

As an educator Miss Niles continues to take an active role in bringing greater awareness to disability issues within Ontario, Canada from an anti-racist, anti-oppressive and intersectional lens. She strives to accomplish this in her position as the Accessibility Coordinator at the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants where she works to educate the settlement and disability sectors about the needs of newcomers with disabilities.

Chavon completed a Master's degree in Critical Disability Studies from York University focusing on regular and special education classroom teachers' perceptions of teaching students with IEPs, a Bachelor of Education degree from the University of Toronto with a specialization in primary/junior education, and an Honors Bachelor of Science degree from McMaster University with an interest in supporting students with disabilities in the classroom.



ACCESSIBILITY

OCASI's Accessibility Initiative allows service providers to acquire new skills and knowledge in areas related to service provision to immigrants with disabilities. Through this initiative, service providers learn more about immigrants with disabilities and their diversities; gain a greater understanding of the different legislations that exist internationally, nationally, provincially/territorially as it relates to the rights of people with disabilities; examine the relationship between disability, race, immigrant/refugee status and other layers of marginalization. Moreover, service providers become better aware of the requirement of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) and what their organizations needs to do to become accessible in the long term.

Currently the Accessibility Initiative has 4 modules available online in English and French in a self-directed format and an in-person facilitated session. The 4 modules include: an introduction to working with clients with disabilities; inclusion, accessibility and the law; understanding the experience of disability in different cultures; and an introduction to basic accessibility features that spaces and programs should include.

POSITIVE SPACES

The overall purpose of the project is to support the immigrant and refugee serving sector to better serve LGBTQ+ communities as well as newcomers living with disabilities in Ontario. It seeks to bridge the gap between the LGBTQ+ communities, disability and settlement sectors and is designed to achieve this through the consultations with stakeholders, the development of curriculum for settlement workers, provision of training, and the development of new partnerships with key players in targeted communities. This initiative is made up of 4 modules that are offered both online (self-directed) and in-person (with a facilitator). The modules include an introduction to key terminology and concepts; an examination of power, privilege, and marginalization through an anti-oppressive lens; an exploration of policy and leadership for change; and an overview of LGBTQ+ rights and realities around the globe.



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[www.nych.ca / perspectives](http://www.nych.ca/perspectives)



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