

Using Storytelling as an Effective Teaching Tool and Community Builder

**Reviewed by Rebecca Rose
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Caroline Behrman, Bill Lyons, Patricia Hill, James Slowiak, Donna Webb, and Amy Shriver Druessi, *The Akron Story Circle Project: Rethinking Race in Classroom and Community*. Akron, OH: University of Akron Press, 2017, 225 pages. ISBN: 978-1-629220-52-9.

Story-based community projects use storytelling to generate productive discussion, make connections, and share diverse perspectives. Storytelling can spark transformative learning inside and outside the classroom (Maslin-Ostrowski, Drago-Severson, Ferguson, Marsick, & Hallett, 2018), and can initiate conversations that lead to community building (Dixon, 1995; Kim, 2001; McKnight & Block, 2010). The Akron Story Circle Project grew out of a larger interdisciplinary initiative, which sought to capture these collective memories and express them via art projects and performances that culturally enrich the community (Behrman, Lyons, Hill, Slowiak, Webb, & Druessi, 2017). Designed to weave a “tapestry of community” (Research Center, 2008), the Story Circle Project provided a structured, equitable environment where memories of events and people from the Civil Rights Movement would be shared. The chapters contained in the book would be of interest to those interested in teaching methods that invite an open, thoughtful, and honest dialogue about race. This topic is as critically important in today’s turbulent racial climate as it was in 2007, the year *Rethinking Race* launched as an annual event at the University of Akron (UA).

The Akron Story Circle Project was the most successful community effort within a larger multicounty initiative, the Color Line Project (CLP). As acclaimed Story Circle practitioners, John O’Neal and Theresa Holden established the CLP and wrote the book’s foreword, which provided context, background, and motivations for the ambitious community-based projects (Behrman et al., 2017). CLP’s goals included the formation of partnerships between community members, arts organizations, and educators in Akron and across five other cities. The partnerships’ objectives included implementing Story Circles, a technique used to collect personal reflections and experiences from the Civil Rights Movement. Story Circles generated enhanced levels of understanding via structured discussions. Participants in the Story

Circles included University of Akron students and community residents, and occurred both in classrooms and in community venues. O’Neal and Holden (Behrman et al., 2017) also stressed the timely nature of capturing stories from Civil Rights Movement participants, before those firsthand stories were lost forever. CLP’s desired outcomes included the creation of art and performances from the stories to enhance and benefit current and future residents of the participating communities.

The book’s introduction informed the reader of the criteria necessary for implementing effective Story Circles, and revealed Akron’s relationship with race historically. The Story Circle facilitators followed guidelines that were adapted from a process developed by John O’Neal: Facilitators received training beforehand to learn techniques that guide the group toward telling personal stories about race, as well as carefully listening to the stories of others. A critical distinction was to define a story as a personal recollection rather than opinions, debates, or arguments. While a group member is revealing their story, the group listens with openness, acceptance, and without comment or disruptive facial expressions. Each member of the group received an allotment of time for telling their story, with an option to remain silent during their time. The skill of learning to listen to other’s stories yields a safe environment that promotes a new level of understanding for the participants.

The book offers six chapters written by the professors who described the use of Story Circles as a teaching tool within their classrooms or at a community venue. The disciplines included political science, communications, social science research, art, and theater at the University of Akron. Additionally, Story Circle outreach events happened in nearby neighborhoods significantly impacted by the Civil Rights Movement. These six chapters describe the pedagogical value of using Story Circles as an engagement technique, and assess the positive outcomes generated from hosting productive discussions during *Rethinking*

Race, the annual cocurricular event at the university. The final chapter reflects on lessons learned and the positive outcomes from the Story Circles.

The first chapter, "Teaching about Racial Conflict with Story Circles," describes two sequential courses taught by Bill Lyons, professor of political science. He confessed the common apprehension that teachers experience before giving up total control of the classroom with techniques such as discussion-based teaching. He invited Story Circle experts John O'Neal and Teresa Holden to lead the initial sessions. Afterward, students documented their impressions and reflections in a reaction paper and then in a researched central themes paper. His class held the following semester included many returning students from the first class who signed up because they valued the Story Circle approach. The chapter concludes with an assessment of using the technique, along with samples of student work.

Patricia S. Hill's "Let My Story Speak for Me: Story Circles as a Critical Pedagogy" also discusses Story Circles as an instructional strategy within her Intercultural Communication class. This narrative offers solid pedagogical theory that supports the application of using Story Circles as an instructional strategy and the specific assignments used in the class. One of the assignments is also a reaction paper, but includes instructions to analyze the stories to answer three questions.

The third chapter, "Story Circles and the Social Science Toolkit," considers the differences between a group interview or focus group and a Story Circle. After studying data types, collection techniques, and analysis tools, students in two upper-level social science courses received instruction on the development of narrative elicitation prompts with the purpose to compare data gathered from Story Circles and focus groups.

Donna Webb's "Once Upon a Time: Story Circles and Public Art in Cascade Village" branches out from the classroom into the community. The chapter describes the creation of a public art exhibit based on stories collected from a historic downtown neighborhood that has existed since the mid-1800s. When Akron became a major industrial center for the rubber industry, factory jobs brought in huge numbers of white Southerners and African Americans, a mix that culminated in the formation of one of the largest Ku Klux Klan chapters in the northern United States (Tully, 2011). Akron experienced a riot attributed to racial tensions in 1900. The Civil Rights Movement brought attention to the neighborhood and

the memories collected from the Story Circles reflected experiences from the era.

Amy Shriver Druessi's "Story Circles: A Powerful Tool in the Multifaceted Toolkit for Addressing Race in University Cocurricular Programming" discusses the evolution of UA's Rethinking Race event and its use of Story Circles from its inception in 2007 through 2012. Data provided in the chapter reveal the value participants placed on their experience from attending the events and shared selected survey comments written by students.

Chapter 6, "The Akron Color Line Project Public Performance," contains the play's script, written using the stories collected from the Akron Story Circle Project and stories from the city's history books. The actors perform on stage using a backdrop comprised of projected contemporary photographs of the Akron neighborhoods where many of the stories took place.

The final chapter ties the chapters together and assesses the use of Story Circles for teaching and in the community. The chapters reinforced the value of fostering deliberative and structured conversations that became possible in a public setting via Story Circles. The author (Behrman et al., 2017) convincingly called for providing more and sustainable outlets for civil discourse in our classrooms and communities with the purpose of bringing together people with opposing points of view.

The book's chapters attempted a unique style in their presentation format. In an attempt to incorporate running discussions with all the authors, their reactions and comments to the content appeared in embedded gray "chat" boxes throughout each chapter. Unfortunately, this technique served more to distract from otherwise compelling narratives. Perhaps, separating out the added commentary, or removing the boxes entirely and placing them within their own chapter, would improve the readability of the narrative and eliminate the need to flip pages back and forth to resume the flow of ideas contained within the text.

With some irony, note that the placement of conversation boxes directly within the chapter content could be likened to violating Story Circle guidelines that proscribe uninterrupted story telling. Additionally, the visual difficulties of reading the small font printed within gray boxes compromised the benefit of the additional commentary. Preferably, at the point where the gray box conversation begins, placing a marker

could alert the reader to a box located in a sidebar, rather than blocking the progression of the narrative. While some of the added commentary added context and backstories of mixed relevance, much of it offered little more than positive displays of support from colleagues for the author's work as it unfolds in the narrative.

Each chapter in *The Akron Story Circle Project* clearly shows the versatility and effectiveness of incorporating Story Circles across several disciplines. The book's content is profoundly useful and inspirational for seeking ways to incorporate iterations of the Story Circle technique into other disciplines and/or classroom situations, in addition to discussing/collaborating with colleagues. The book successfully demonstrates that students respond to hearing authentic experiences of others, which opens their minds to listening to diverse perspectives, thereby bringing people together.

References

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