



StEPS-UT INTERPRETATION MODULE

Storytelling: Telling Difficult Stories & Interpretation Policy

HANDS-ON ACTIVITY #1 = 30 minutes

Telling a Difficult Story Discussion

INSTRUCTIONS:

After watching *The Meaning of a Monument*, American Museum of Natural History [15:55 minutes]:

- 1) Break into four groups, each with a facilitator.
 - 2) Use the Talking Circle technique (recall details overleaf).
 - 3) Discuss the questions below and take note of your responses (25 minutes).
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TAKE NOTES ON YOUR SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION:

- 1) What interpretation techniques did the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) employ to tell the statue's difficult story?

- 2) Is the interpretation effective? How does it make you feel about the monument? About the museum?

- 3) The exhibit that accompanies this video is inside the museum and is temporary. Does AMNH have a responsibility as a community storyteller to continue interpreting the statue? Why or why not? If so, how?

- 4) Does the fact that the museum holds collections from Native American and African peoples impact this responsibility? Why or why not?

TALKING CIRCLES

Talking circles come from the traditions of indigenous people of North America, particularly tribes in the Midwest. The circle assumes equality between participants and uses the principle of sharing power with each other (instead of having power over one another). Talking circles can be used for discussion, problem solving, and/or decision making. The basic purpose is to create a safe, non-judgmental place where each participant has the opportunity to contribute to the discussion of difficult and/or important issues. They offer a place for connection and dialogue where all participants are open to being influenced by what happens during the process and do not enter the process hoping to persuade others or expecting a specific outcome.

Talking Circle Technique

- Only one person speaks at a time. Everyone should be listening in a non-judgmental way to what the speaker is saying. Some groups find it useful to signify in some way who has the floor. Going around the circle systematically is one way to achieve this. Another is to use some object (such as a stone or stick) which the person who is speaking holds and then passes to the next person.
- Silence is an acceptable response. No one should be pressured at any time to contribute if they feel reticent to do so. There must be no negative consequences, however subtle, for saying “I pass”.
- At the same time, everyone must feel invited to participate. Some mechanisms for ensuring that a few vocal people don’t dominate the discussion should be built in. For instance, no one speaks twice until everyone in the circle has been given the opportunity to speak once. An atmosphere of patient and non-judgmental listening usually helps the shy people to speak out and the louder ones to moderate their participation. Going around the circle in a systematic way, inviting each person to participate simply by mentioning each name in turn can be an effective way to even out participation.
- It is often better to hold talking circles in groups of five to fifteen rather than with a large group, because in smaller groups everyone has time to say what they need to say without feeling pressured by time.
- Speakers should feel free to express themselves in any way that is comfortable: by sharing a personal story, by using examples or metaphors, by analytical statements, etc.
- All comments should be addressed directly to the question of issue, not to comments that another participant has made.
- Speak from your own point of view, using “I statements.” Generalizations like “People want. . .” or “People don’t realize. . .” or “We think. . .” can alienate other participants, prevent connection with the speaker, and reinforce stereotypes and myths.
- The group leader facilitates the discussion by acknowledging contributions in a nonjudgmental way (that is, by avoiding comments such as “good comment” or “great” which can be seen as making comparisons between different contributions), and by clarifying comments when necessary, (i.e, “If I understand what you’re saying, you’re...”).
- No comments which put down others or oneself is allowed. Some agreed-upon way of signaling the speaker when this is occurring should be established. Self put-downs include such comments as, “I don’t think anyone will agree with me, but...” or “I’m not very good at...”

Sources: *The Sacred Tree Curriculum Guide*. The Four Worlds International Institute, 1988
“Using Talking Circles in the Classroom.” Alaina Winters, Heartland Community College,
<http://www.heartland.edu/documents/idc/talkingcircleclassroom.pdf>