

The following structure is just a little more complex, yet can be adapted to generate endless possibilities. As an exercise or game, the story spine activity invites participants to improvise the development of a well-structured story by spontaneously filling in the blank for each line. With iterative attempts, the stories can flex our creative muscles more and more.

1. Present the story spine frame:

- Once upon a time ...
- Every day ...
- But, one day ...
- Because of that, ... (repeated 2–3x)
- Until finally ...
- Ever since then ...
- The moral of the story is ... (optional)

2. Provide a brief description and example of a story using this frame. The frame can be used as a reflection on something that has already happened, or it can be used as a prospective to something we wish to see happen. For example, if used as a reflection following a service-learning trip, *But one day* could be filled in with the experience of participating in that trip. Alternatively, if used as a visioning exercise, the participant's or organization's vision statement could be filled in under *And, ever since then*.

3. Have participants create and/or complete a story one sentence at a time, using the cue words to begin each sentence. Depending on time, participants can practice creating multiple stories or responding to various prompts using the story spine frame. The story spine frame can also be used to help participants create an outline for a talk or presentation.

- To increase the interactivity and to experience a cocreative process, invite participants to work with a partner or in a small group. Participants can take turns providing a response to each sentence stem of the spine. Depending on the intended application, participants can write out stories on the same topic or theme and share their stories with each other. The entire group can then attempt to identify common themes or elements in the reflections shared. Additionally, participants can debrief their own stories and discuss their emotional reactions, the key learning points, and any implications for future change or action.

Debriefing Questions:

- Did the structure help you or hinder you? How?
- What value does this structure provide? What are key elements that help hone our learning and

growth? How could the structure be applied to leadership learning and development?

- *Because of that* reinforces the connectivity (e.g. cause and effect, intent and impact, etc.) in our stories. What can we do to increase our awareness of connectivity in our lives and in our impact as leaders?
- What role does change play in our lives? How does change impact our leadership development journey? Is change inherently good or bad? Planned or unplanned? Internally generally or externally imposed? Does it matter?

Resources:

- Adams, K. (2007). *How to improvise a full-length play: The art of spontaneous theater*. New York, NY: Allworth Press.
- Koppett, K. (2013). *Training to imagine: Practical improvisational theatre techniques for trainers and managers to enhance creativity, teamwork, leadership, and learning*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Pixar in a Box: The Art of Storytelling. (2019). Retrieved from <https://www.khanacademy.org/partner-content/pixar/storytelling>

OUR STORIES, OUR VOICES

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- 2 hours–3 hours 30 minutes
- 8–25 participants

In this activity, participants present a creative narrative of their life stories, including how this has shaped who they are and what legacy they will pursue. After hearing each narrative, the group processes through a shared reflection of learning to engender a collective conarrative and establish a deeper connection across participants.

Learning Goals: Participants will have opportunities to:

- engage in reflection, through creative narrative of their life story.
- envision future possibilities, through creative narrative considering their future legacy.
- create a collective conarrative through noticing differences and similarities in their personal stories.
- build relationships through hearing others' narratives and making connections across difference.

Materials: none

Process:

1. Offer the following information in your syllabus or on a handout. Give the information in advance and

allow for plenty of time (several weeks) for participants to prepare to participate in this activity:

- *You will present a creative narrative of your life story, including how this has shaped who you are and what legacy you will pursue. Historically, participants have approached this project by writing a poem, expressing their experiences through song lyrics and music, showing a painting, or creating a slideshow with photos and video of their lives as they present to the class. This assignment is open to your interpretation and is intended to expand our understanding of each other by hearing and appreciating everyone's individual stories. Each participant will have 5–7 minutes to present.*

Questions you *may* ask yourself to prepare for this presentation include:

- What is your family narrative?
 - Where do you come from and how does that influence who you are?
 - What are your salient (most important) social identities (i.e. gender, race/ethnicity, religious identity) and how do they show up for you?
 - How do your most salient identities influence how you see yourself as a leader?
 - If you could only state it in two sentences, what would you want your life legacy to be?
 - How does your story so far inform your future legacy?
2. This activity requires honesty, clarity about the expectation of vulnerability, and the need for a supportive space to give participants a platform to speak their truths. The facilitator should present their own Our Stories/Our Voices narrative the week before the participants present to give an example and to also show vulnerability and openness to the power of their own story.
 3. It is important to be aware that some participants may have more challenging stories than others, and some participants may choose to be more vulnerable than others. It is a delicate balance between creating an open space for hearing the power of stories in a safe, yet brave space (Arao & Clemens, 2013). Facilitators should use caution to ensure participants from historically marginalized identities are not unduly expected to shoulder the burden of vulnerability.
 4. All participants should engage in active listening throughout to give respect, grace, and power to the presenter, and participants should listen with

empathy, compassion, and love for the person presenting.

5. Following the presentation of all the narratives, the facilitator should share appreciation and acknowledgment for the power and importance of the stories shared. The facilitator should then employ open time for supportive statements of learning and appreciation for all participants.
6. This language can be added if the activity is used as an assignment for a course:

"Because of the open and creative nature of this assignment, this project is not graded on a scale, and all participants who attend class during presentations and share their story through any creative means will receive full credit."

Debriefing Questions:

- This is an open time for appreciation and acknowledgment for yourselves and your peers. Please give shout outs and love for what we have heard today.
- Why is it important for us to give voice to or share creatively our own lived experiences?
- Where do we see moments of connection in our stories?
- How do we feel connected because we have listened to one another's truths?
- What do we envision a conarrative could be for this group?
- How would we tell a collective story, and why might that voice be powerful?

References:

Arao, B., & Clemens, K. (2013). From safe spaces to brave spaces: A new way to frame dialogue around diversity and social justice. In L. M. Landreman (Ed.), *The art of effective facilitation: Reflections from social justice educators* (pp. 135–150). Sterling, VA: Stylus.

Resources:

- Bell, L. A. (2008). *Storytelling for social justice: Connecting narratives and the arts in antiracist teaching*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Delgado Bernal, D. (2002). Critical race theory, Latino critical theory, and critical raced-gendered epistemologies: Recognizing students of color as holders and creators of knowledge. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8, 105–126.
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Turner Kelly, B., & Bhargal, N. K. (2018). Life narratives as pedagogy for cultivating critical self-reflection. In J. Dugan (Ed.), *New Directions for Student Leadership: No. 159. Integrating critical perspectives into leadership development* (pp. 41–52). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.