

Tool Kit

Authentic Story Telling: Supporting Young People in Sharing their Truth

by Marcia Hopkins

Throughout history, stories, and narratives have been told about, and by communities. These narratives often shape how we learn, and our thoughts and perceptions about others. Many narratives about Black and Brown and Indigenous communities are put forth by white story tellers, informed by white supremacy, and result in damaging and inaccurate views of Black and Brown communities. These harmful narratives become integrated in the social conscious and retold as if they are “truthful.” These narratives which are often told through the lens of White Eurocentric culture are used as a weapon to demonize, discredit, and disenfranchise Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities. It is imperative that communities most disenfranchised by preexisting systemic structures unapologetically tell their stories.

Sharing stories in Black and Brown and Indigenous can take many forms, like using stories, to advance survival, share history, teach culture, and be a form of artistic expression. When communities, like young people impacted by systems, strategically and unapologetically share their stories, they have an opportunity to engage with their past, put forth true and accurate narratives, and promote healing within themselves. Telling stories can be life-changing, as it challenges exiting systems of

oppression and tells the history of communities from the viewpoint of those most impacted. It also enables young people to identify the solutions needed to address the problem.

For those of us working with young people to share and tell their stories and narratives, we must acknowledge the white supremacist culture embedded in systems, address our own discomfort, and ageism, and work to challenge, evolve and dismantle the culture of oppression and silence forced on communities. Additionally, adults should utilize trauma training and systems knowledge, and take a person-centered advocacy approach to supporting youth to share and use their narratives for change. Having different techniques, and methods to tell stories like writing, using art, and Using range of sharing strategies are important to decrease re-traumatization, exploitation, and triggering experiences that may discourage youth from further engaging in advocacy efforts. Youth or individuals should never be forced or pressured to share their stories for the sake of sharing; this can be oppressive and dehumanizing. It’s also important to recognize and discuss with youth the impact, potential risks, and dangers, ways to mitigate these challenges, and benefits of telling their narratives, and how sharing may affect the people most important.

Jim Casey Strategic Story Sharing Method

As an advocate with lived experience in the foster care system, having a strategy or process to engage in “strategic story sharing” is important. Casey Family Programs and Foster Care Alumni of America define strategic sharing as “telling your story in a way that is meaningful, effective, and safe.” Juvenile Law Center’s Youth Advocacy Programs uses various methods for working with youth leaders to strategically share their stories; this process is outlined in the 5th Key Component in the Building the Field of Ethical, Authentic, and Youth-led Advocacy Publication. Following the methodology of strategic story sharing and narrative reshaping, it delves into the importance of allowing youth to take the lead when deciding on if, how much and how little they want to share, and suggestions on creating learning and work environments that support this process.

1 Self-Reflection for Adult Allies and Supporters

a. Ask yourself why you are asking youth to present or share?

What is it you want to learn from young people? What is the end goal of the presentation or speaking event? - for example, is it to have youth highlight issues and recommendations for policy reform? Is the goal to expand knowledge on an issue area to staff, a board?

b. Check bias at the door.

Meet every person where they are and check any racial, gender, and generational biases and isms at the door.

c. Be transparent about where you are in your journey to become self-aware.

d. Check professionalism bias.

Many people have specific views on professionalism based on white American patriarchal culture that too often inappropriately restricts expression and can perpetuate harmful methods of defining and sharing the lived experiences of others. But no person/ youth is the same nor uses the same language. How youth show up to a space, what they wear to express their identities and culture, the cultural references they present, how they express themselves, and how they share their stories and experiences may hold deep cultural significance and connection to their individuality and expression. There are also creative and alternative ways to story-tell that do not always fall under the adult white American ideals of professionalism.

e. Remember you are teaching while learning.

There is always more to learn from others, including young people. Regardless of a young person’s experience, their age, race, or gender identity, all young people have valuable contributions to make to the field. Young people and their stories should be treated with respect and authenticated. They have the lived experience and expertise that makes them best suited for this work; they have a lot to offer.



**f. Know your role:
check paternalism at the door.**

Working with and collaborating with youth sometimes means just that. Be respectful of the role young people want you to play in their lives. There are benefits to developing deep meaningful relationships that also respect the working relationship, people's boundaries. How you speak to them, about them, your tone, body language, and how you interact with them matters. In the words of Miguel Angel Ruiz, "Respect is one of the greatest expressions of love."

g. Power dynamics can influence partnerships with youth.

We all hold varying lived experiences and levels of power in our daily lives and in specific situations. For those of us working on behalf of institutions, and/or in fields like social work or law, we bring a level of power and representation of structures that have historically disenfranchised communities, including the communities of the young people who may be presenting. It's important to acknowledge and analyze and confront how these dynamics can influence and impact how we work and prepare young people. When necessary, we must determine how to address this, move forward, and collaborate in ways without causing further harm, or oppression to the communities we serve.

2 Support Youth in Sharing their Stories

Everyone has a story; that does not mean it is meant to be shared with everyone. Stories are sacred and powerful. They often provide us a glimpse into history, culture, people.

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be used as a tool for advocacy. However, sharing can sometimes be challenging, and triggering.

- a. Strategic story sharing strategies can be used to raise awareness of people's experiences and can be used as a tool for advocacy. However, sharing can sometimes be challenging, and triggering.
- b. Utilize Jim Casey and Foster Care Alumni of America's Strategic Story guide.
- c. Use artistic avenues for youth to share their stories and expertise. For example, groups like Performing Statistics use artistic expression to advocate to end youth incarceration and close youth prisons. Adults/Groups should work with youth to prepare accordingly for speaking engagements, but in ways that build on their skills and creativity.
- d. Work with youth to understand why they are there and what they're hoping to work towards.
- e. Talk to youth about ways that story sharing can be harmful and use tools to mitigate the potential harm, like talking to youth about using pseudonyms, and their comfort with changing identifying information.



- f.** Use tools from groups working with communities to share their stories. There are many groups like Reframe, and Rad Comms that have developed tools and advocacy strategies around story sharing and building narratives for social change.
- g.** Professionals should seek youths' expertise on issues and focus on the goals.
- i.** Treat youth with dignity and respect. Malcom X once said, "Tokenism is hypocrisy." Youth and communities know when they are being used for an "illusion" of inclusion. Strive to engage in practices that truly authenticate youth experiences, and truly build them into the work or program. Create policies that prohibit tokenizing communities, and clearly outline a process for how your agency works with communities. Use youth expertise to grow internally and push for systemic reform.
- ii.** Refrain from requesting youth complete work not connected to their own goals, advocacy efforts or passions, as this expectation can perpetuate the exploitation of young people's lived experiences.



3 Use an Adolescent Developmental Framework for Engaging & Working with Youth

Everything around us shapes our stories and life experiences.

- a.** When supporting anyone to share, it is important to recognize all the components about them that potentially impact their story, like mental health, family, future, history, and culture.
- b.** Engage with youth in a way that they understand and can connect with, acknowledging learning differences. Respect the ways each person learns.
- c.** Get to know young people. Learn about them, engage with learn and learn about who they are and what they feel makes them unique.
- d.** Use words or acronyms youth are familiar with
- e.** Take the time to clarify
- f.** Be patient
- i.** There is no timeframe in which trust is gained and deeply held relationships are developed. It might take a year for a youth to begin to trust staff.



4 Utilize a Cultural Competency Framework

Culture is beyond race, and everyone's differences should be respected.

- a. Provide cultural competency training to staff and youth. Deliver them in a way that is easy to understand.
- b. Engage in learning about the impact of systemic oppression on different cultures and races.
- c. Remember, even if someone shares an experience and identifies with someone else, they are still their own individual.
- d. Be mindful of the ways your own identity plays out when you're working with young people to share their stories.
- e. Provide support to staff working with young people. This includes, being cognizant of competencies and supports staff of color may need working with youth from their same or different communities.
- f. Refrain from using stereotypes about youth or communities.
- g. Address office culture in the workplace and analyze the effects on staff and youth.
- h. Don't make assumptions. Let youth tell you how they identify themselves, in terms of race, gender, orientation, pronouns etc. Respect it and honor it.
- i. Acknowledge that how people identify is fluid and can evolve over time. Respect it and honor it.



5 Create a Youth Friendly Environment

- a. Develop Community Agreements.
- b. Have snacks and food available! Providing a meal can be culturally significant, help to build trust, and foster community.
- c. Use music and artistic expression as a tool. Art, in all its forms, including music can be soothing, uplifting, and bring people together.
- d. Conduct check-ins or use ice breakers that allow youth to Ask young people about how their day is going and check in about how they are doing, or some if they want to share.

- e. Have an icebreaker or team builder prepared.
 - f. Ask young people what settings make them most comfortable - make them feel welcome
 - g. Remember that context matters - for example, sometimes someone can have a hard day, or is showing signs of discomfort in a particular environment; this doesn't always mean it's tied to another youth, staff or the program. We don't always have personal context. Before jumping to conclusions, privately ask youth if they need take space or talk to a supportive adult.
 - h. Develop materials that are youth friendly. These materials should be geared towards a youth audience and use plain language.
 - i. Create inclusive learning environments: Utilize methods that promote the various ways that youth learn, for example using audio, visual, and other techniques to deliver or gather information from youth.
 - j. Support youth in determining what a safe space truly means for them. Sometimes youth friendly, doesn't always mean a safe space. Not everyone may be comfortable sharing or engaging right away and most spaces are not "safe" or do not feel "safe" for communities of color and communities that have been the most marginalized. Organizations must recognize that even environments deemed by adults as "youth friendly" are not always friendly to youth. Allow youth to determine what space is truly supportive for them.
- b. Repetition and reminders are key to communication. Finding the best means and times to communicate with young people is imperative to their engagement. Use different methods of technology to communicate and ask young people what their preferred method is and how they like to communicate best. While there might be some professional boundaries, agencies should be flexible (*example: staff should not be expected to communicate outside of work hours, however, if they know a young person is in school all day and can only communicate in the evenings, the staff person might make an exception to accommodate the young person's schedule*)
 - i. Designate staff as a point of contact. This is key, so youth have consistency and it is clear whom they are working with and should communicate with.

Seek to build and strengthen relationships with the youth. Remember that trust is earned.
 - c. Always designate and ensure there is time to fully explain everything and answer questions that a youth may have. Build in time for this process.
 - d. Explain things in a youth friendly way. This means not using jargon! Provide examples when it seems unclear. Repetition is key.
 - e. Respond to questions in a timely way that is easy to understand. Refrain from condescending tones. Be transparent if you do not have the answer for a youth right away or if you are not the best person to answer their question. Point them in the right direction, if you don't have the answer, even if it means you must point them to someone outside of your organization.
 - f. Condensing tones. Be transparent if you do not have the answer for a youth right away or if you are not the best person to answer their question. Point them in the right direction, if you don't have the answer, even if it means you must point them to someone outside of your organization.

6 Communicate Effectively with Youth

- a. Check your body language and tone of voice. Know your role with youth.

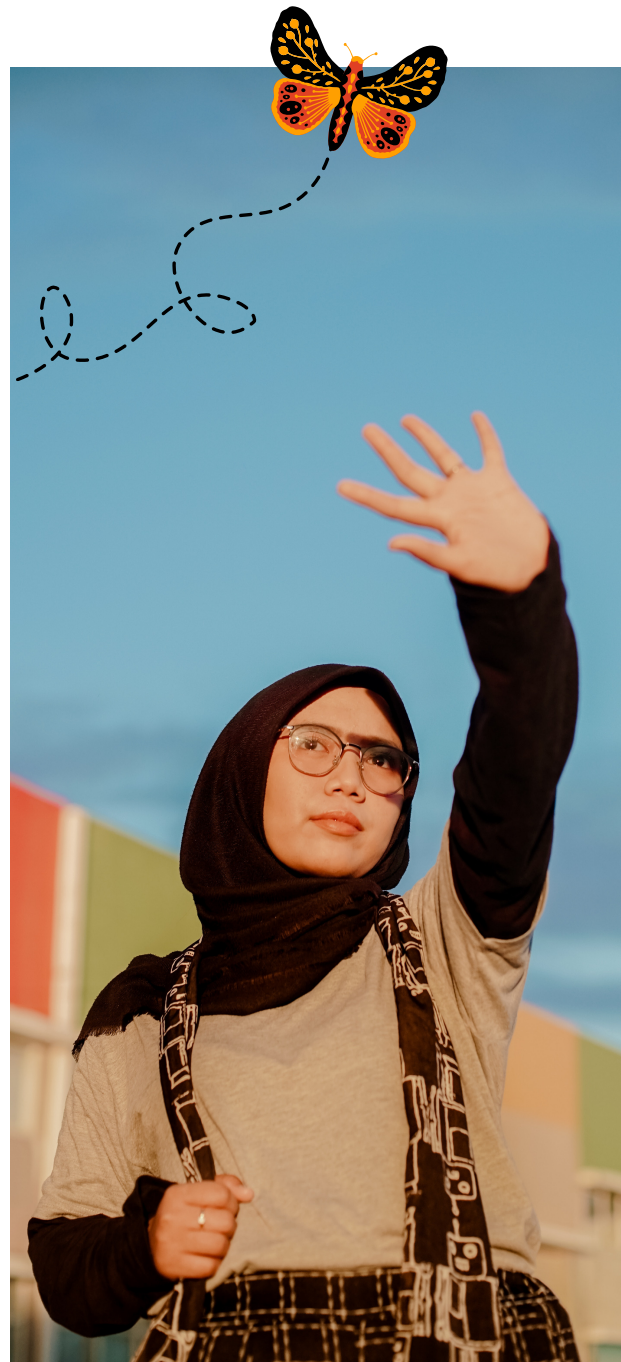
7 Provide Financial Compensation

- a. Be up front if you can and cannot compensate youth for their time.
 - i. If you fit into this category as an organization, stop and listen! If you cannot compensate youth, you need to consider the ethics and benefits you are receiving if you are requesting their time and hard work for unpaid labor. If you cannot pay, seek resources that can fund your agency to pay for their time. Everyone's time is valuable.
 - ii. If you are a government entity or agency and it goes against your own ethical code to pay communities for their time, then seek out a partnering agency that can both manage and distribute the funds.
- b. Compensate for transportation and travel.
- c. Young people are experts on their lives and experiences, and their expertise should be compensated as it is imperative for this work in the field.
- d. Compensate for the time they prepare on their own for speaking.

8 Remember Youth Have Lives like Everyone Else

Youth have lives, obligations, families, interests, and conflicts that arise when they are doing advocacy work just like other professionals and adults.

- a. Youth must be awarded the same flexibility and respect for their lives as others.
- b. Understand time constraints with youth who are working and parenting.



- c. Recognize that the pay might not be enough to support them, and there may be times when youth need to pause and come back, especially if it is not their part-time or full-time job.
- d. Youth should never feel like they have to compromise their own time to participate in the work, nor feel like they must work with constraints and challenges over their responsibilities.

8 Prepare Youth to Train, Share, Present

- a. Put in the initial work of having youth understand the impact of their work in a youth-friendly way.
- b. Repetition, prompt questions, and letting them give examples can be essential.
- c. Work with young people to practice, review, and develop the structure of their presentation. Ask them about their boundaries and be sure they understand the purpose of the presentation and goals.
- d. Provide public speaking, strategic story sharing, narrative and historical narrative training and other training that build young people's comfort, ownership, and leadership.
- e. Offer additional support. Let youth know that if they need help, have questions, or need reassurance that they have someone they can trust to go to.

