

Guide to Facilitating Energized Storytelling Circles

**David M. Boje - Sept 9, 2008;
Revised Sept 22, 2008 with Joe Gladstone**

There are premodern ways of storytelling that call for a more ancient metaphysics. I think that modern positivism, with its pension for turning storytelling into tools with instrumental focus, needs to be suspect. It is possible to enter a manner of storytelling and facilitation that harkens back to premodern methodology.

Talking Stick Story Circles:

Talking Stick Story Circles are conversational encounters with a back-and-forth of story-telling and story-listening, noticing fragments of retrospective narrative and fashioning as well prospective antenarratives (bets of story transformative possibilities) that affect the whole, that change Flat Grand Narratives into something vibrant with future potentiality.

I suggest here that it's important not to treat a Talking Stick Circle as a brainstorming event, or as a way to do a committee meeting. Rather, the processes of creating sacred spaces are ancient. These are not metaphors. They are definitely a different metaphysics than that of modern management practices. The Talking Stick Storytelling Circle has many layers of ritual and meaning.

In this study guide I coax facilitators to work with the energy of the group, with sacred rituals.

Talking Stick Circle Guidelines

1. We sit in circles, not pyramids.
2. The person with the Talking Stick is the designated story-talker.
3. Pass the Talking Stick clockwise. Start with the person sitting in the East-most position, then go to the right. In Talking Stick going clockwise is an earth-process. Otherwise the magic is undone.
4. Persons without the Talking Stick, please listen, write notes, and notice the story. Focus your listener attention on the storyteller with the Talking Stick. Let your mind recall stories as the teller tells stories.
5. Try to limit interruptions. A person with the Talking Stick can pass it to someone for a clarification, question, or amplification on a point, then call the stick back to finish their story.
6. There will be multiple rounds of Talking Stick Story Circles. Each time there is a question. At the end of a round of story-sharing, story-noticing (story-listening), a spokes-person repeats the main themes, issues, resolutions, proposals that came up. So be sure to take notes.

7. The output of Talking Stick Circle is ideas, proposals, and stories of a vitalized community. Designate people to listen, to observe, and to provide a report out of the collective story that is emerging in the Circle.
8. The point is to create a collective story, one that is faithful to everyone's living stories, to unify in community.

What Direction Do You Pass A Talking Stick?

Notice in Figure 1 - that the Direction the Talking Stick is passed is always clockwise, starting in the SE position, then to S, SW, W, NW, N, NE, and finally the E position, which closes the sacred circle.

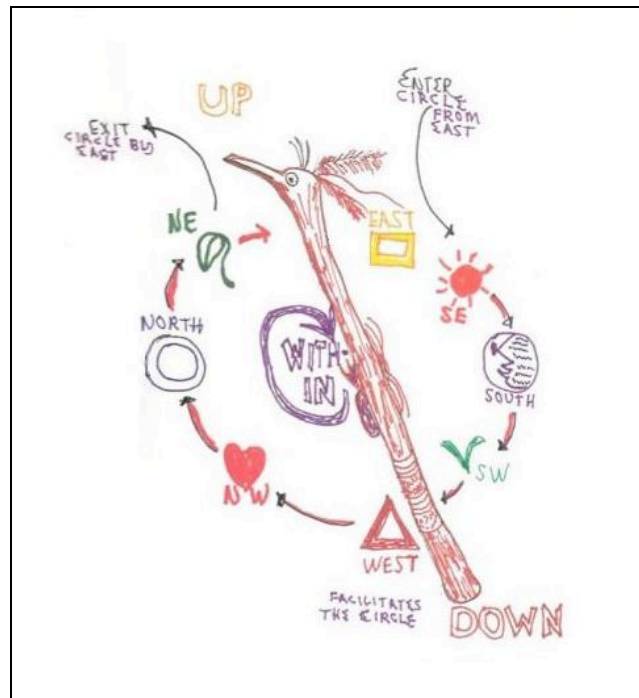


Figure 1: Direction to pass Talking Stick

Arranging the Storytelling Circle

Arrange chairs in a circle to start the process, with the chair left out of the East position. The Facilitator sits in the West, facing East (figure 2). People enter the circle from the East. The last person in the circle, sits in the East, and closes the Sacred Circle (figure 3). After the Circle is arranged, and people are seated, then explain the guidelines.

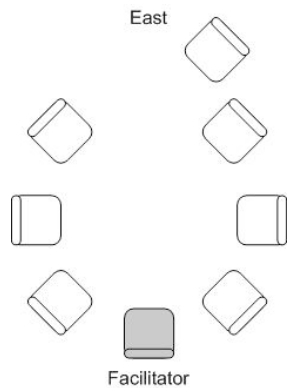


Figure 2: Open Storytelling Circle

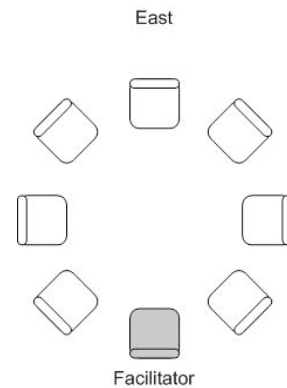


Figure 3: Closed Storytelling Circle

Facilitator Guidelines

1. Explain guidelines for using the Talking Stick and doing story listening
 - ❖ When you have the Talking Stick you have the POWER to tell a stor
 - ❖ When someone with the Talking Stick is telling their story, please do not interrupt. Let them tell for as long as it takes.
 - ❖ The point is to give each person their turn to tell and to be listened to by everyone in the Circle.
 - ❖ If you must ask a question, or make a point, then ask for the stick, be very brief, then give it back to the person interrupted.
 - ❖ Start the telling in the SE position, move clockwise until the NE and finally the E positions have had their turn at storytelling. At this point the Talking Stick goes back to the Facilitator, who may ask for another round of storytelling.
 - ❖ People are free to check on any given round.
2. Discuss the differences in storytelling depending upon one's chosen place in the Talking Stick Circle. Each tribe around the world has its own rules for storytelling, its own sensemaking of energies and directions. These are developed to put people in a more premodern frame of consciousness.
3. If the group begins to start doing free for all discussion, with multiple conversations, people talking at once, and ignoring the storyteller with the Talking Stick, its past time for the facilitator to intervene. Just politely re-explain the way a Talking Stick Circle conducts its storytelling.

If someone interrupt, and speaks out of turn, or side conversations start, or not everyone is listening to the storyteller holding the Talking Stick

The facilitator sitting in the West has the head-person position. It is their job to orient the storytellers in the Talking Stick guidelines, and to intervene (politely and diplomatically) when the guidelines are being broken. See guidelines for using the Talking Stick. The guidelines are simple: You hold the stick and you have the power to talk, and everyone else listens. If there is a violation, then the facilitator calls for the Talking Stick, promising to return it. The facilitator re-explains the basic rules that are in breach. Then the facilitator passes the Talking Stick back to the storyteller.

What if someone has a question or wants to amplify an event in the story?

See if they can wait. If not, then the person with the Talking Stick can pass just the feather or the entire stick to the person who must now talk. When that person has finished their point, the facilitator asks for the Feather or entire Talking Stick to be returned to the storyteller whom was interrupted.

What if the person with the Talking Stick does not give it up?

Under Indigenous rules the person with the Talking Stick tells does their storytelling until they are done. In modern times, with an emphasis on speed, there is little tolerance for listening (& not much skill at it). As facilitator, you remind the Circle that the storytelling process is not a race, and the person gets to do their storytelling. However, when there are time limits and the point is to give everyone a chance to voice their story, then the facilitator can signal (politely to move it along). If the Circle starts being rude to the storyteller, and the process is too rushed, then that rushing becomes the implied rule of behavior, and the Storytelling Circle degenerates into usual group dysfunctions. Sometimes, a person will finish telling, and the next one will start telling, but not be passed the Talking Stick. It is sensible for the facilitator to intervene. The facilitator is responsible for keeping a fair and equitable process, and for keeping the sacredness of the Storytelling Circle in tact.

How reflective listening plays a role in the Storytelling Circle

As people learn the ancient ways of story-listening, there is an important self-reflexive process going on as a person is telling. The listeners are following the story of the teller, and doing tellings-to-themselves of similar events, characters, and scenarios. Gertrude Stein (1935) calls it the ability to tell stories to the self, while listening to another's story. She calls it a form of genius.

What the directions of a Storytelling Circle all about

The 7 directions (Kaylynn Twotrees) are South, West, North, East (cardinal directions), and Up (Sky), Down (Netherworld), and Within (Introspection).

Figure 4: The 7 Directions

Direction

Symbol

South



Figure 4: The 7 Directions

Direction	Symbol
West	
North	
East	
Up	
Down	
Within along North-South Axis	

What are the kinds of Storytelling Associated with the Directions?

Figure 5 displays some examples of the kinds of storyteller roles that might manifest in a well-formed Storytelling Circle. These are examples. Do not make them assignments. The point is for each person to take a moment on reflect upon where they are at. The Storytelling role examples come from my own research on the nature of the directions in their ancient meanings from the Greeks, to Celts, to Native American traditions. There are a variety of differences. These work for me.

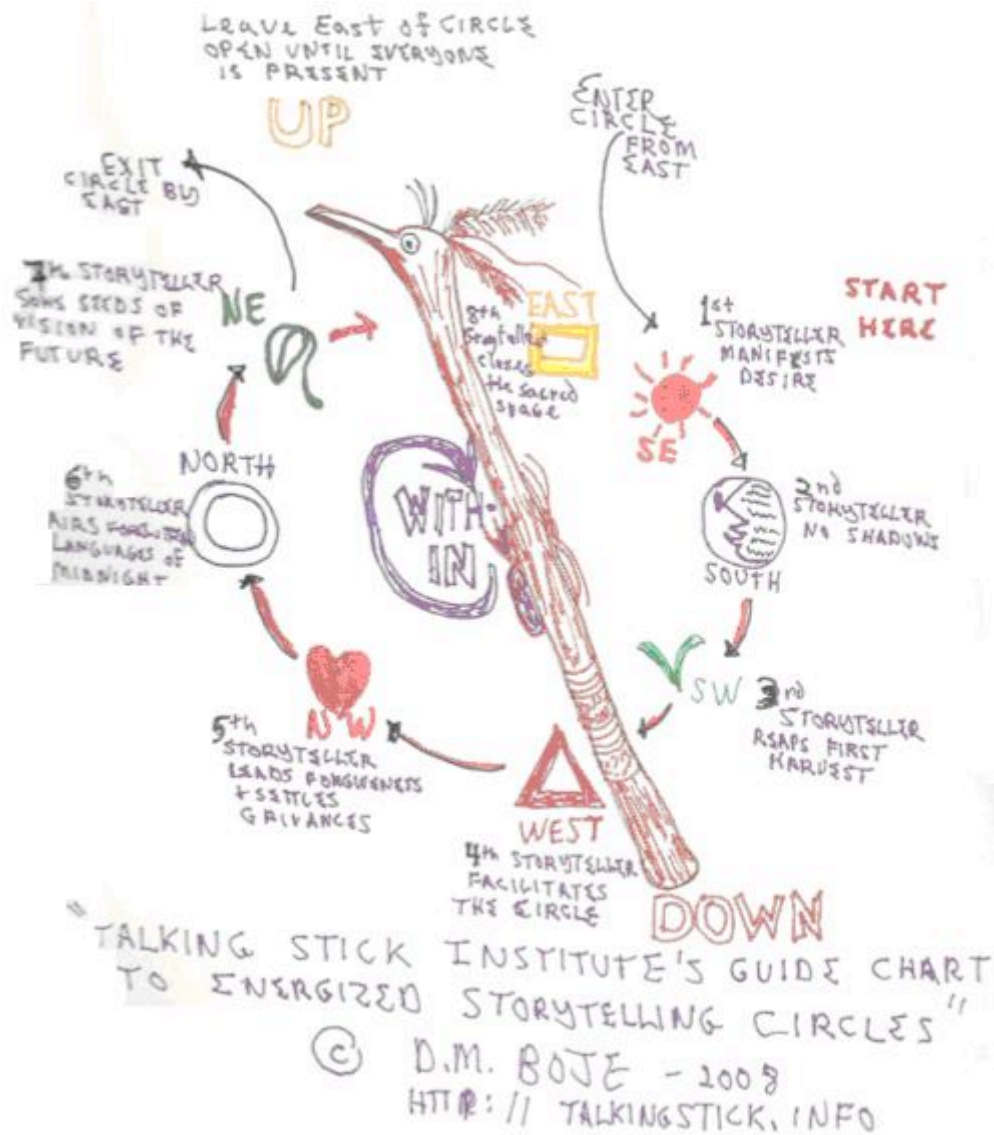


Figure 5: Guide Chart to Energized Storytelling Circles (© D. M. Boje, 2008)

What are Chakras?

Since ancient times, there are those who believe that the body (& directions) have certain energies. In Figures 1 & 2 are ancient symbols called Tatwas. There is also a table that follows indicating Chakras, many associate with various directions in Storytelling Circle. I look at Chakras, living stones, and Tatwas (sacred symbols) as important facets of the energy process.

Why Premodern?

The skills of the storyteller, and the story-listener have eroded, and some say died (e.g. Walter Benjamin). This methodology is decidedly premodern, and meant to be different than modernist ways of knowing. It is not a brainstorming technique. It is a way that in collective societies, voices were heard, and through listening and working a thing through, decisions got made that people bought into.

If doing premodern ways offends you, then stop reading, and just pass the Talking Stick, and don't look at the event as in anyway sacred or as even a premodern aesthetic inquiry.

However, if you want to learn the real power of the ancient ways, about reenchantment of our late forms of modernist living, then read on.

HOW TO FACILITATE IN THE PREMODERN WAY

This is something I am learning from Joe Gladstone. Facilitators sit in the West Position of the Talking Stick Circle. The chairs are arranged in a Circle, with the East portion of the Circle left open (no chair there), so people can enter and exit the Circle until the session begins, and every participant is fully present. Being fully present means, seated, silent, and ready to listen to the Facilitator's instructions.

Now I want to add some ways of storytelling that are important to me. In Table 1, there are Eight Storytelling Positions. The facilitator can remind the participants that where they choose to sit meaning. Each storytelling position in the circle has an energy, a direction, and will result in them telling a different story.

Use only as much Premodern Storytelling as make sense given the sensibilities of the group.

How does where you Sit in a Storytelling Talking Stick Circle influences the Storytelling you do?

It is important to set a sacred space, to be reflexive (introspective) instead of instrumental, or so time-bound that people do not get to really share their stories. So start in the SE and move clockwise. As facilitator its your job to teach people how to use a Talking Stick. When they revert to free for all, stop, intervene politely, and get back to the old ways.

SEATING POSITION	TYPE of STORYTELLING
SE	1st to start storytelling. The warmth of the morning sun manifests desire in this storytelling
SOUTH	2nd Storyteller. The symbol in Figure 1 means Moon and Water. The high noon sun means there are no shadows in this storytelling
SW	3rd Storyteller. The "V" is for Voice. This storytelling is the voice of the first harvest of summer
WEST	4th Storyteller. This is the head-person position, the facilitator of the Talking Stick Circle. The Triangle in Figure 1 means Fire.
NW	5th Storyteller. The Heart means this storyteller is all about forgiveness and settling grievances, to move on.
NORTH	6th Storyteller. The Circle is a symbol for Air. This storyteller expresses midnight, the speaking of forgotten languages.
NE	7th Storyteller. The symbol is a seed breaking through ground. This storyteller sows the seeds of a vision for the future.
EAST	8th Storyteller. The Square Yellow symbol stands for Earth & Universe. When this person is seated, they close the circle. When the session ends, they move their chair to open the Circle. This storyteller protects the Sacred Space of the Circle.

Table 1: Eight Storytelling Positions

IF YOU WANT TO GO INTO A MORE POWERFUL SPACE OF STORYTELLING AND PEOPLE ARE WILLING, YOU CAN LOOK AT MORE LIVING PROCESSES OF THE PREMODERN WHERE THERE ARE ENERGIES TO TRANSMUTE, AND NOT ONLY DIRECTION, BUT SOUND, COLOR AND EVEN STONES LIVE.

What are the Energies (Chakras) of the Storytelling Circle and its Directions?

Now it's time to look at the Energy work in the Talking Stick Circle. Opinions vary on choice of direction, color, and stone associated with chakra energy points. Again a caution is necessary. Different tribes and cultures, at different times put these relationships into different patterns. Insight into the Chakras, Tatwas, and Sounds comes from my work with Toni Delgado at A Next Step. She has taught me to breath, to release and replace energy along the 7 Chakras, and to pay attention to sounds. I have added colors, stones, and storytelling work that follow. This is what works for me. You will have to experiment and see what works for you.

7 CHAKRAS	DIRECTION	SOUND	COLOR	STONE
Crown	E	MMM	Violet	Amethyst
3rd Eye	S	OM	Indigo	Sapphire
Voice/Throat	SW	HAM	Blue	Lapis Larult
Heart	NW	YAM	Green	Aventurine
Power	Within (N – S line)	RAM	Yellow	Celtic Marble
Spleen/Sex	W	VAM	Orange	Carnelian
Root	Up - Down	LAM	Red	Jasper

Table 2: 7 Chakras

There are Seven Directions according to Kaylynn Twotrees. I give them my own interpretation. Kaylynn does not set out the Chakras, the meanings, or the Circle roles in the way that I do. So beware what follows is my own way of doing things.

Table 3: The 7 Directions










Direction	Symbol	Meaning	Chakra	Circle Role
South		The Moon and Water in interplay.	6th Chakra (MMM) known as 3rd Eye	What does sitting in the South call you to notice?
West		Triangle Symbol in ancient Tatwa for Fire	2nd Charkra (VAM) known as Spleen or Sex	What does sitting in the West call you to notice?
North		Circle is antient Tatwa symbol for Air		What does sitting in the North call you to notice?
East		Yellow square is Tatwa symbol for Earth and the Cosmic Universe / Spirit	7th Chakra (MMM) known as Crown	What does sitting in the East call you to notice?
Up		Father Sky	Is the Ether (LAM), the 1st Chakra, known as the Root	Everyone can focus on the UP direction, on the spiritual, the transcendental. For some its Father Sky, what is it for you?

Table 3: The 7 Directions

Direction	Symbol	Meaning	Chakra	Circle Role
Down		Mother Earth and Subterranean	Is also the Ether (LAM), the 1st Chakra, known as the Root	Everyone can focus on the DOWN direction, on the ancestors, on animal helpers. For some its not these things, DOWN means something quite different, what is it for you?
Within along North-South Axis		Looking within, beyond ego, to do introspection, and look at one's Answerability to stories heard & told	3rd Chakra (RAM) sits in the Center of the Circle along N-S axis	To be within a Sacred Circle is to call yourself into a place of introspection, and reflexivity on you in your place of Being-in-the-World. What are some reflexivity questions to ask yourself in this Circle.
NW		Heart combines Directions of Air & Fire	4th Chakra (YAM) known as the Heart	Some believe that in the NW is the combination of Air and Fire elements so essential to the Heart. However, you may hold some other belief. What is it?
SW		V is for Voice; combines Water (S) and Fire (W)	5th Chakra (HAM) known as Throat or Voice	A storytelling circle can be about finding your voice, not only as a teller, but as a deeper listener? Where is your voice today? Are you being heard?

The point of this study guide is to explore Premodern Methodologies for sharing stories, for passing the Talking Stick, for transmuting energy, and developing new insights. I cannot say its the way things were done many thousands of years ago. I can say that it was a time when stones were alive, when directions had energy, when there were energies of the body that affected how a storyteller told, and how people listened. There were ancient skills that with the industrial revolution, with the Enlightenment project, and the advent of positivism, rationalism, and technologies are no more. The skills have withered. But there are some ways to revitalize some of the premodern storytelling ways, now and then.

Thank you,

David Boje