

MAGAZINE FEATURE

Toolkit for Beyond the Knapsack

Serial Testimony is a facilitation method that empowers students by valuing their knowledge and insight. It offers young people the opportunity to testify to the realities of their own lives, making their personal reflections part of the curriculum.

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Serial Testimony creates classroom dialog that doesn't focus on convincing others or winning an argument, but rather on sharing perspective that can inform how students view themselves and the wider world.

Essential Questions

1. How does Serial Testimony support student learning in ways that traditional class discussions do not?
2. How does the democratic distribution of time empower students participating in Serial Testimony?

Testimony: Bearing witness, giving evidence; speaking the truth of one's experience and perspective; bearing responsibility for one's own thought.

Serial: In a series.

For this group activity, the facilitator states a theme or opens with a simple question. Each participant, timed, speaks in turn, uninterrupted, without response from other group members. Participants speak from their own experience and without reference to what anyone else in the group has said.

The timing may be handled by mechanical timer, a wrist watch, a stop watch or an egg timer. The facilitator or timer slowly raises the watch or timer when time is up.

A minute is often an effective length of time for an initial round. It can be followed by more rounds on the same or different themes.

A session may have five to six rounds with occasional debriefs on patterns which participants have noticed in their testimony, or anything they wish to say about their experience of the process. But the generalizations which Serial Testimony intentionally interrupts may quickly re-surface in such a debrief. A better prompt for a debrief is, “What was this go-round like for you?” This keeps participants’ attention on their own experience.

Serial Testimony does not aim to “solve” problems or create “dialogue” among participants. The purpose is not to “piggyback” off others’ comments or to take sides, but rather to contribute one’s own perspectives. In small, cohesive groups that have already a high degree of trust and agreement, the facilitator may wish to use traditional “discussion” and “dialogue” rather than Serial Testimony.

I call Serial Testimony “the autocratic administration of time in the service of democratic distribution of time.” Some of its advantages are that:

1. It requires participants to speak for themselves.
2. Participants speak about their own experiences, rather than their opinions.
3. It prevents single individuals’ views from becoming the focus of discussion.
4. It brings each person into the conversation, if they wish.
5. It establishes a predictable order for people to speak in.
6. It provides the opportunity for everyone in a group to hear a wide variety of perspectives in a comparatively short time.
7. It allows matter of difference and commonality to be seen side-by-side.
8. It prevents disagreement and argument.
9. It interferes with familiar pecking orders or patterns of domination and subordination in speaking.
10. It respects freely chosen silence.

Simple as this technique is to many participants, it feels unnatural, especially to those who like what is usually called discussion or dialogue. In discussion or dialogue the time distribution may reflect the existing power relations in a group: many are silent; others ally or disagree with each other; the group as a whole serves as an audience for the few; people take sides; only a few perspectives are developed; the silent participants wonder what they should say, if anything, or wish that it would all go away.

A facilitator of Serial Testimony should prepare the group in advance for the structure and logic of the technique. He or she should ask the participants to honor the following ground rules:

- Listen to each speaker in stillness
- Do not interrupt with comments, questions, or physical signs

- Concentrate on what others are saying before your own turn comes and immediately after your turn, tune back in, rather than wondering “how did I do?”
- In speaking, stay with your experiences and feelings and reflections, not your opinions.
- During your turn, do not refer to what others have said before you. Focus on contributing your own experience.
- Keep your comments within the time allowance.
- Use Serial Testimony to learn how to listen and reflect as well as to focus your speaking.

The facilitator needs to decide whether he or she will participate or not. Either choice can be interpreted by the group members. If the facilitator chooses not to speak this affects the power dynamics, and the facilitator should reflect on the choice ahead of time. Whatever the decision, the facilitator must not take more time to testify than others have been given.

Allow people in the group to pass (or keep listening). At the end of the round they can be asked whether they would like to speak now.

Some facilitators ask participants to make brief notes before the Serial Testimony begins. This helps the most talkative members of the group to focus on what they really want to say. But in some contexts everybody appreciates the chance to make notes or think for a bit before starting a go-round.

Two or more go-rounds can be done in succession.

Closing circle testimony about the experience of the process may be done through a minute or half-minute of reflective silence, a minute or more for participants to write comments and perhaps read them, an opportunity to debrief the experience by Serial Testimony or by spontaneous responses (“popcorn” style), which is not Serial Testimony.

In the SEED Project we often refer to the discipline of the circle. Serial Testimony creates situations in which no one generalizes, speaks for others, holds forth, takes over, shrinks from speaking, feels unheard, argued with, marginalized or disrespected. In Serial Testimony every single person is taken to be the authority on his or her own experience. Serial Testimony creates for adults or children a form of discourse that is not vertically oriented toward winning or losing. It can be a remarkable form for learning about others and learning to see oneself in a wider, plural context.

Serial Testimony is a method I recommended over the phone for small group work in connection with a visit to the College of New Jersey with Victor Lewis in Oct., 2000. The organizing committee at the college paraphrased my

suggestions, which they distributed to faculty and staff. This description is my edited and expanded version of their paraphrase.

- Peggy McIntosh, Senior Associate, National SEED Project on Inclusive Curriculum

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