

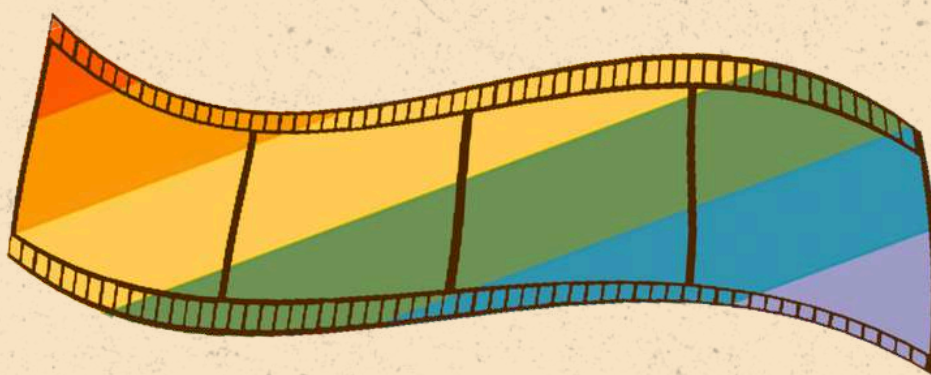


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Our Story

Storytelling for LGBTQIA+ community wellbeing

Manual of good practices



This line is
to challenge
ask your
interpret
you do

All we've put between
you and its power is silence.



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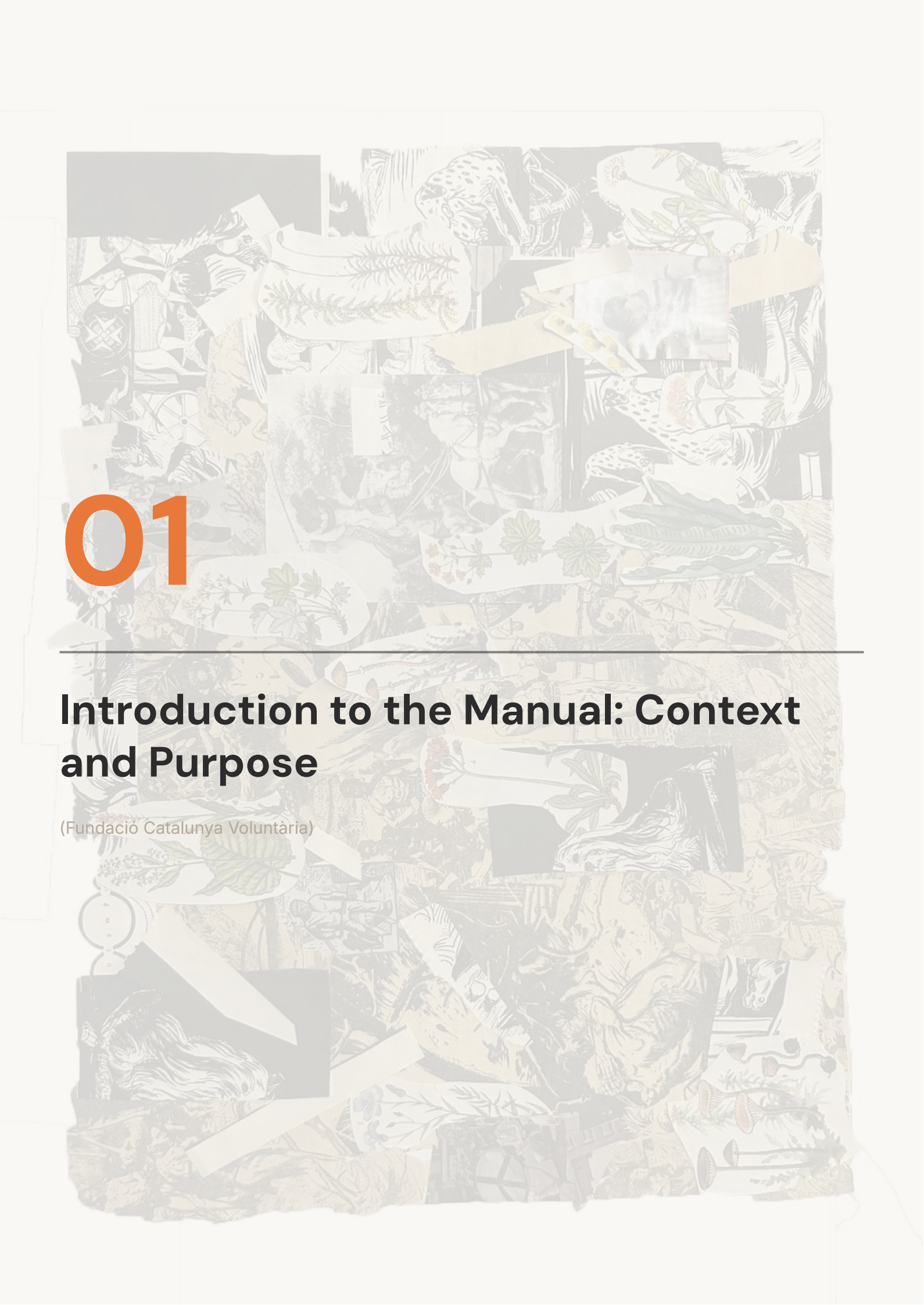
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01

Introduction to the Manual: Context and Purpose

(Fundació Catalunya Voluntària)

1.1 Why this manual exists and who is it for?

In May 2023, the Queer Up international networking seminar brought together representatives from thirteen organisations across nine countries to strengthen the network of those working with and for LGBTQIA+ communities in Europe. It was there that an international consortium of like-minded youth workers came together and shared the reflection that LGBTQIA+ young people need spaces - physical, relational and digital - where their stories can be told on their own terms, where inclusive practices can be built collectively, and where knowledge generated within communities can travel across borders. *Our Story – Storytelling for LGBTQIA+ Community Wellbeing* was born from that conversation. The following manual is one of the means to create such spaces.

This work has two main objectives. On the one hand, it seeks to build closer connections between members of society, reducing social distances and promoting understanding. On the other hand, it ensures that the LGBTQIA+ community is fully included, working in close partnership and addressing their specific needs.

This manual presents the final and revised version of the project guidelines. Here, readers will find a description of inclusive storytelling practices, including practical guides for storytelling activities and insights into effective methodologies and approaches. Readers will also find lessons learned and reflections from the entire process.

This work is free of charge and available to the general public; however, it has been primarily designed for the development of Erasmus+ programs and for use by organizations interested in implementing practices and methods that make their activities more inclusive, particularly taking into account the needs of gender and sexual minorities.

It may be assumed that this kind of work is no longer necessary, as it is often assumed that all existing barriers have been overcome. Nevertheless, numerous challenges persist nowadays, as a significant part of the LGBTQIA+ community still struggle with acceptance in their families, work places or institutional and administrative structures.

As long as this situation persists, initiatives like the one presented in this manual remain necessary.

In many countries, the LGBTQIA+ community is relegated to the margins, making their voices increasingly difficult to hear. By developing projects such as this one, we aim to strengthen the community's voice so it can be heard and not dismissed or relativized. As Bell Hooks points out,

We are transformed, individually, collectively, as we make radical creative space which affirms and sustains our subjectivity, which gives us a new location from which to articulate our sense of the world (Hooks, 1990).

1.2 LGBTQIA+ wellbeing and the role of inclusive storytelling

A quick research in the Oxford Dictionary provides the following definition of well-being: With reference to a person or community: the state of being healthy, happy, or prosperous; physical, physiological, or moral welfare.

If we consider how this definition applies to LGBTQI+ community, we realize that, unfortunately, as a community we are still far from fully fitting it. This might create difficulties with: self-concept, view of the world and schema of others (Zwerling, 2016).

Through history, many philosophers have reflected on the concept of human well-being. Among the most recent and influential contributors to this discussion is Martha Nussbaum, who wrote a book titled *Creating capabilities* in 2010. In this book, Nussbaum analyzes, among other topics, the capabilities that a human being should possess in order to live a full life. That is, what a person must be able to do in order to achieve a good life. One of the most important contributions of the book is what has become known as "Nussbaum's list of ten central capabilities" where she describes the ten capabilities that every human being should be able to exercise in all contexts.

Life

Being able to live a complete and satisfying life into old age. Not having life cut short or being made such that it hardly seems worth living.

Emotion

Being able to become attached to other things and people outside of ourselves, loving and caring for them. Experiencing grief, longing, gratitude or justified anger. Not being subject to fear and anxiety or blighted by trauma or neglect. (Nussbaum, 2010).

Epistemic injustice and the margins

These two capacities often remain inaccessible to LGBTQIA+ people around the world. In a way, they illustrate that, as a community, we are experiencing conditions that differ greatly from those of people not belonging to the LGBTQIA+ community. That difference gives us a perspective on the world that is often overlooked and not considered as much as it should be. We tend to be "the others" and, as a result, we are often relegated to viewing our lives from the margins. Bell hooks writes the following about the margins:

"To be in the margins is to be part of the whole but outside the main body." (Hooks, 1990).

In order to move beyond this state of isolation, it is necessary to connect with our experiences and reflect upon them, not only as individuals but also as a community. This may seem like an easy task, according to Kürnberger «Whatever a man knows, whatever is not mere rumbling and roaring that he has heard, can be said in three words». However it can involve certain complications, as we will see. As philosopher Miranda Fricker explains, people belonging to marginalized groups may experience what she calls epistemic injustice, a situation in which their testimonies are not granted the same credibility as those of others. In such cases, the experiences of minority groups may be ignored, misunderstood or dismissed, making it even more difficult for these experiences to be shared and recognised.

The epistemic injustice is a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower (Fricker, 2007). This means that the harm caused to the person is not limited to the disregard of a person's experiences, but also affects their self-esteem and their ability to share knowledge. Every time that this happens, a form of knowledge is lost and it's almost impossible to recover until the person that suffers that injustice regains confidence or finds another way to express their experience and the knowledge they hold about it.

It is also common that individuals who have not directly experienced that situation attempt to explain it from an external perspective. This can be problematic, as the language used does not arise from the community itself. For someone belonging to a minority community, such as the LGBTQIA+ community this can be interpreted as:

"No, we don't need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell you back to you in a new way" (Hooks, 1990).

The identification of a social problem is not intended to assign blame to any particular individual. Its purpose is primarily to become aware of the problem, and assuming personal responsibility to prevent its recurrence.

In order to move away from the issues that we mentioned so far, one possible approach is to turn to inclusive storytelling. This format is respectful with all communities and helps to build networks of support and personal growth. Storytelling is closely related to our well-being, as it is a liberation from all the insecurities and problems we mentioned earlier.

Art, as we will discuss later, is a great ally for storytelling, since it operates beyond the limits of verbal explanations. Sometimes, words are not enough to fully express our experiences. As Bell Hooks say, "Language is also a place of struggle".

1.3 Project aims and expected results

The reflections developed in the previous sections point towards a shared need: to create conditions in which LGBTQIA+ experiences can be expressed, heard and connected across borders. Our Story – Storytelling for LGBTQIA+ Community Wellbeing was born out of this necessity: not as a response formulated from the outside, but as a collective effort to build spaces where our communities can speak, be recognised, and grow together. As long as many LGBTQIA+ lives remain marked by marginalization, epistemic injustice and restricted access to the capabilities that Nussbaum describes as fundamental to a full human life, projects like this one remain not only relevant but necessary. The goal of Our Story is to translate this understanding into practice: to create spaces where voices that are too often silenced can be heard, where stories that are too often ignored can be shared, and where the distance between individuals and communities can be bridged through trust, mutual care and shared learning.

This is not only a matter of individual wellbeing. As perspectives on collective resilience remind us, healing and empowerment are deeply intertwined processes — they depend on shared meaning-making, mutual support and the sense of belonging to something larger than oneself (Norris et al., 2008). Storytelling, as we understand it here, is precisely a practice that holds this relational dimension at its heart. It is not simply about giving individuals a platform to speak; it is about creating the conditions for people to meet, to speak and for communities to form. To do so, the project has organized its work around three interconnected aims, each of which responds to a real and felt need within our communities.

The first aim is to **listen**. Before acting, we needed to understand: to carry out a participatory, bottom-up needs assessment that would allow us to grasp the current situation of LGBTQIA+ youth in the participating countries, their realities in relation to rights, health and wellbeing. This process reflects our commitment to grounding the project in lived experience rather than in assumptions made from a distance. We cannot claim to speak for communities we have not taken the time to listen to.

The second aim is to **build a shared language**. One of the obstacles that LGBTQIA+ communities face is the absence of a common framework for speaking about gender, sexuality and inclusion- a framework that is both precise enough to be useful and flexible enough to hold the diversity of our experiences. Within the project, we have worked collectively to develop an LGBTQIA+ code of conduct and a shared glossary, drawing on the knowledge and practices already present in each partner organization. The result of this collaborative process is reflected in this manual, which we offer as a practical resource for organizations seeking to make their spaces more inclusive and their activities more queer-affirmative.

The third aim is to **empower**. We believe that LGBTQIA+ young people are not only recipients of support but active agents of change in their communities. Through storytelling, artistic practices, civic education tools and self-assessment methods, the project has sought to strengthen their capacity to name their experiences, articulate their visions and take meaningful action in their contexts. As Bell Hooks reminds us, the creation of a radical space that affirms our subjectivity does not simply reflect the world as it is- it helps to bring into being a world that does not yet exist (Hooks, 1990).

1.4 Partnership and roles

No project like this can be carried out alone. Our Story has been built on the collaboration of five organisations, each bringing its own history, expertise and perspective. Their differences are not incidental — they are precisely what makes the project richer, more grounded and more capable of reaching across contexts. Together, we have sought to construct something that none of us could have built separately: a shared space for LGBTQIA+ communities across Europe to tell their stories, learn from one another and strengthen their voices.

Partner organisations

Fundació Catalunya Voluntària (Spain)

Fundació Catalunya Voluntària (FCV) acts as the coordinating organisation of the project. With extensive experience in youth mobility programmes such as Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps, FCV contributes strong expertise in non-formal education, project management and the development of educational methodologies. Within the project, FCV is responsible for ensuring overall coordination, coherence and quality of implementation. It also plays a key role in structuring the methodological framework of the project, supporting the development of the manual and facilitating learning processes across the partnership.

Prague Pride (Czech Republic)

Prague Pride is an organization dedicated to promoting the rights and visibility of LGBTQIA+ people through community organizing, public awareness and advocacy. Since its creation, it has developed a wide range of initiatives aimed at combating discrimination and fostering social change. The organization brings to the project its strong experience in storytelling as a tool for advocacy, particularly through campaigns that collect and disseminate personal narratives of LGBTQIA+ individuals. Its expertise contributes to strengthening the public dimension of storytelling, linking personal experiences with broader social and political change.

Emantes (Greece)

Emantes is a grassroots organisation founded by LGBTQIA+ refugees, working at the intersection of migration, identity and community support. Its work focuses on providing psychosocial assistance, legal support and safe spaces for individuals facing multiple forms of marginalisation. Within the project, Emantes contributes a perspective rooted in lived experience, as well as expertise in trauma-informed and community-based approaches. Its experience with artistic and participatory practices, such as zine-making and creative workshops, reinforces the project's emphasis on storytelling as a tool for healing, expression and empowerment.

Saplinq (Slovakia)

Saplinq is an organisation focused on supporting LGBTQIA+ youth, particularly in regions where access to inclusive spaces and resources remains limited. It has significant experience in organizing community events, educational activities and international trainings. Saplinq contributes to the project its strong background in non-formal education, youth work and anti-bias methodologies. Its work emphasises community-building and capacity development, ensuring that young people are actively involved in shaping inclusive environments and initiatives.

Osservatorio di Genere (Italy)

Osservatorio di Genere is an organisation dedicated to research, education and cultural initiatives related to gender equality and social inclusion. Its work combines analytical approaches with educational and community-based activities. Within the project, the organisation contributes to strengthening the theoretical and reflective dimension, supporting the development of gender-sensitive perspectives and ensuring that the project remains grounded in broader discussions around equality, representation and social justice.

1.5 Methodological approach

If there is one conviction that runs through everything we have done, it is this: the people whose stories this project seeks to amplify are not its objects, but its subjects. The methodology of Our Story is grounded in the principles of non-formal education, participation and co-creation. Every activity, every workshop, every conversation has been designed around the understanding that participants are not empty vessels to be filled with information, but active agents and knowledge holders whose experiences and perspectives are at the very heart of the learning process.

A key element of the methodology is the creation of safe(r) and inclusive spaces, where participants can explore their identities and share personal experiences without fear of judgement or exclusion. These spaces are supported by the code of conduct developed within the project, and are based on the idea of the ever-changing nature of group safety. It requires constant work and care from all sides, therefore the goal is not to define a 'safe space' but collectively and continuously create a safe(r) space.

Core methodological tools

Storytelling

Storytelling functions as the core methodological tool of the project. It is understood as a process of meaning-making and of identity development of the individual, the collective and also on trans-national level, rather than mere means of communication. Through storytelling, participants are able to articulate their experiences, challenge dominant narratives, build connections with others and define both answers, and more importantly, questions, about their experience and identity.

Artistic and metaphorical forms

The process is centered in the use of artistic and metaphorical forms. Methods such as zine-making, collage, poetry and other creative forms and their mixes allow participants to express experiences difficult to convey through conventional language, since not fitting in the convention itself is one of the central traits of the queer experience. Therefore, the proposed means of expression were naturally leaning to mixed and artistic forms while proposing the form not as a limitation, but as an empowering, yet accessible and inclusive tool to share the story.

Digital technologies

On its final stage, the project integrates digital technologies to extend its reach and sustainability. The creation of a digital community platform enables continuing the exchange and visibility, ensuring that the stories and knowledge generated within the project continue to circulate beyond its immediate activities, and most importantly, gives a space for connection and exchange based on the values and understanding co-created with international youth through the two years of the project activities.

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02

Key Concepts and Shared Language

(Osservatorio di Genere)



2.1 Introduction

In any educational or training context, the words we choose not only convey information, but they signal belonging, respect, and the boundaries of a shared space.

Language does not function only as a neutral tool for communication, but also plays a role in shaping how social realities are perceived, interpreted, and legitimized. Research has shown that linguistic forms can influence attitudes and expectations related to gender and social roles (Bem & Bem, 1973; Wasserman & Weseley, 2009; Prewitt-Freilino et al., 2012). In this sense, language can be understood as both descriptive and constitutive: it reflects existing social norms, but also contributes to maintaining or challenging them. For participants whose identities are often marginalised or misunderstood, the availability of appropriate and inclusive terminology can influence not only how they are perceived by others, but also how they are able to express and make sense of their own experiences. While language alone cannot address structural inequalities, it represents a concrete and immediate lever through which facilitators can reduce assumptions, support self-definition, and create more inclusive conditions for participation.

At the European level, policy frameworks and institutional guidelines (European Commission, 2020; Council of Europe, 2020; ILGA-Europe, 2024) increasingly converge on the recognition that language plays a central role in promoting equality and inclusion. Inclusive language is framed both as a practical tool for contrasting discrimination in educational and civil society contexts, and as a deeper political matter: the words used to describe identities and experiences are understood to carry meaning, shape visibility, and define the boundaries of collective struggles and aspirations.

So, this chapter pursues two complementary goals. First, it offers a working glossary of key terms (grounded in European sources); second, it provides practical guidance on how to use shared language in ways that are accurate, respectful, and genuinely inclusive.

However, it is crucial to underline that language evolves differently across the countries of the European Union and, of course, the world. Consequently, facilitators, educators, and civilians are encouraged to stay attentive to the terminology that people use and update their vocabulary accordingly. For this reason, the glossary and the principles presented in this chapter should be considered as a starting point rather than a fixed reference.

2.2 Glossary of Terms

The following glossary draws primarily on the Equality Glossary and Thesaurus by EIGE (2023), the Compass manual (Council of Europe, 2020), ILGA-Europe's Strategic Framework 2024–2029 (ILGA, 2024), the Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to member states on measures to combat discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity (Council of Europe, 2011), and other sources from literature (Bauer et. al. 2009; Butler, 1990; Berlant & Warner, 1998; Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies, 2009). Terms are grouped into three thematic clusters: sexual orientation; gender identity and expression; inclusion and social context. Within each cluster, entries are listed alphabetically.

Sexual Orientation

Term	Definition
Aromantic	A person who experiences little or no romantic attraction towards others, regardless of their sexual attraction. Aromantic identities exist on a spectrum.
Asexual	A person who experiences little or no sexual attraction towards others. Asexuality is a spectrum, and being asexual does not imply being aromantic.
Bisexual	A person who experiences sexual and/or romantic attraction to people of more than one gender. The term encompasses a wide range of experiences and is not defined by behaviour.
Gay	A man who experiences sexual and/or romantic attraction primarily or exclusively to other men, including non-binary people who identify with this term.
Homosexual	A person who is attracted to someone of the same sex; homosexuality is the sexual, emotional and/or romantic attraction to persons of the same sex. It is not recommended to use it as an umbrella term to refer to the all LGBTQIA+ community.
Heterosexual	A person who is attracted to someone of a sex other than one's own; heterosexuality is the sexual, emotional and/or romantic attraction to a sex other than one's own.
Lesbian	A woman who experiences sexual and/or romantic attraction primarily or exclusively to other women, including non-binary people who identify with this term.
LGBTQIAP+	Acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersexual, Asexual/Aromantic, Pansexual, and others (+). The term acknowledges diversity while remaining practical for communication. Often, shorter forms, such as LGBT+, are used.
Pansexual	A person who experiences sexual and/or romantic attraction to people regardless of their gender identity or sex characteristics.
Queer	Historically a slur, reclaimed by many LGBTQIAP+ people as an inclusive, non-normative identity label. Used both as a personal identity and as an umbrella term.
Sexual orientation	An enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attraction towards people of a particular gender or genders. Sexual orientation is distinct from gender identity.

2.3 Glossary: Gender Identity and Expression

Gender Identity and Expression

Term	Definition
Cisgender/Cis	A person whose gender identity corresponds to the sex they were assigned at birth.
Gender expression	The external presentation of one's gender through social cues (e.g. clothing, behaviour, hairstyle...). Gender expression may or may not correspond to expectations related to a person's gender identity or assigned sex at birth.
Gender identity	A person's deep-felt internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond to the sex assigned at birth. Gender identity is distinct from sexual orientation.
Intersexual	A person born with sex characteristics (including chromosomes, gonads, hormones, or anatomy) that do not fit typical binary definitions of male or female bodies. Intersex is a biological variation, not a gender identity.
Non-binary	An umbrella term for gender identities that are not exclusively masculine or feminine. Non-binary people may identify with both, neither, or a fluid combination of genders.
SOGIESC	Acronym for Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Gender Expression, and Sex Characteristics. Used primarily in legal, policy, and advocacy contexts at international and European level in relation to LGBTQIAP+ community.
Transgender/Trans	A person whose gender identity differs from the sex assigned at birth. 'Trans' does not imply any specific medical intervention.

Inclusion and Social Context

Term	Definition
Ally	A person who does not identify as LGBTQIA+ but actively supports the community and works against discrimination. Allyship is a practice, not just an attitude.
Brave space	A physical, digital, or relational environment that recognises that conversations about identity, power, privilege, and discrimination may involve discomfort, disagreement, and challenge. A brave space does not replace the need for care or protection from harm; rather, it prepares participants to engage honestly and respectfully with difficult topics, distinguishing between discomfort that can support learning and harm that must be addressed. Brave spaces are particularly relevant in social justice education, where the goal is not to avoid conflict at all costs, but to engage with it responsibly.
Cisnormativity	The assumption (embedded in social norms and institutions) that all people are cisgender, and that cisgender experience is the default or norm against which other gender identities are measured.
Coming out	The process by which a person discloses their sexual orientation or gender identity to others. Coming out is ongoing, context-dependent and a personal-process, so nobody should ever be pressured to come out.
Heteronormativity	The set of social norms, assumptions, and institutions that position heterosexuality as the default, normal, or preferred sexual orientation. Heteronormativity renders other orientations invisible or deviant.
Intersectionality	A framework, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), for understanding how multiple social categories and systems of power - such as race, gender, class, disability, sexuality, nationality, age, religion, language, housing, neurodiversity, body size, and others - interact simultaneously. Intersectionality highlights that these categories are not isolated. Their interaction can produce specific forms of vulnerability, discrimination, privilege, and opportunity that cannot be fully understood by analysing each category separately.
Intersectional approach	It considers how different social positions and systems of oppression or privilege operate together in a specific context. In youth work, an intersectional approach avoids treating LGBTQIA+ people as a homogeneous group and asks who is being reached, who may remain excluded, and what barriers are produced by overlapping inequalities.
Outing	Disclosing another person's sexual orientation or gender identity without their consent. Outing can have serious consequences for safety, relationships, and employment, and is widely considered a violation of privacy and autonomy.
Safer space	A physical, digital, or relational environment that is actively and continuously co-created to reduce avoidable harm, discrimination, ridicule, or exclusion. The term safer space is preferred in this manual to safe space because no facilitator or organisation can guarantee complete safety for everyone at all times, especially in groups marked by different experiences of marginalisation, privilege, and exposure. Safer spaces depend on clear agreements, consent, accessibility, accountability, and ongoing attention to group dynamics.

2.3 Principles of Inclusive and Respectful Terminology

Using appropriate language is more than a matter of politeness, it reflects a commitment to accuracy, dignity, and the recognition of lived experience. Drawing on EIGE's guidelines (EIGE, 2023), the Erasmus+ Programme Guide's non-discrimination principles (European Commission, 2024), and ILGA-Europe's reflections on language legitimacy (ILGA-Europe, 2024), this section sets out some principles in using inclusive and respectful terminology.

Principle 1: Use accurate, non-stigmatising language

Language that pathologises, medicalises, or sensationalises LGBTQIAP+ identities reinforces stigma and misrepresents the communities involved. Facilitators should use current, community-endorsed terminology and avoid clinical or archaic labels unless participants use them for themselves or expressively ask to refer to them with those labels.

✓ DO	✗ DON'T
Use gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans, non-binary, intersex, as current, precise terms. If you are not sure, ask the interested person about any preference or check if the person has specified it somewhere else (in other official documents, e-mails, contacts, and so on).	Do not use "homosexual" as an umbrella term for all LGTQIA+ community.
Say trans people or transgender people.	Do not say transgendered (as if transgender were something that has been done to a person), transgenders, a transgender or transsexual (this is an old clinical term sometimes used by individuals who have undergone or seek medical transition).
Use sexual orientation and gender identity as distinct concepts.	Do not conflate the two, e.g. by saying sexual orientation includes trans identities.

Principle 2: Apply neutral wording where appropriate

Choosing the right words is never a one-size-fits-all exercise: different contexts call for different vocabularies, and part of using language responsibly means resisting the impulse to treat one identity as a catch-all for all others. Precision matters, both for accuracy and for ensuring that less visible communities within the broader movement are not inadvertently erased (ILGA-Europe, 2024). At the same time, when specific identities are not directly relevant, umbrella terms can be a more inclusive and practical choice, allowing for greater breadth without sacrificing clarity.

✓ DO	✗ DON'T
Use SOGIESC (Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Gender Expression, and Sex Characteristics) when referring to legal frameworks, discrimination grounds, or policy documents.	Do not use SOGIESC as a synonym for community identity in everyday educational conversation. In educational and community settings, LGBTI+ or LGBTQIAP+ is generally more appropriate.
Use LGBTI+ or LGBTQIAP+ when referring to people, communities, and movements.	Do not use 'gay' or 'lesbian' as a universal stand-in for all LGBTQIAP+ identities, this practice erases the specificity of bisexual, trans, intersex, and other experiences.
Name specific identities when relevant (e.g. 'bisexual people', 'non-binary young people').	Avoid vague references such as 'the gay community'.
Use neutral words where it is possible and according to your needs (e.g. people, individuals, community, citizens, ...)	Avoid using gendered nouns and pronouns if they are not needed (she/he, his/her, women/men, ...)

Principle 3: Avoid assumptions about participants' identities, backgrounds, and lived experience

Non-formal education environments bring together participants with diverse and often undisclosed identities, family configurations, and life histories. Facilitators should design activities and frame discussions in ways that do not presuppose heterosexuality, cisgender identity, nuclear family structures, or any particular cultural background. This is both a matter of inclusion and a safeguard: in many European countries, LGBTQIAP+ people still face legal and social risks that make visibility a complex and potentially unsafe choice (ILGA-Europe, 2024).

✓ DO	✗ DON'T
Ask people what pronouns they use, if the group is comfortable doing so.	Do not assume pronouns based on appearance or name.
Use inclusive examples in scenarios and case studies (e.g. 'two people', 'a parent and child').	Do not default to heterosexual or cisgender examples as the norm.
Create a group language agreement that participants co-design.	Do not impose terminology on participants; language negotiation itself is a learning process.

2.4 Using Shared Language Across Activities, Digital Platforms, and Storytelling

Inclusive language should not only be known by facilitators: it needs to become a shared practice within the group. In non-formal education, shared language helps participants understand one another, ask questions without shame, and notice when words reproduce assumptions or exclusion. For this reason, terminology should be introduced as part of the collective work of creating safer and brave spaces.

At the beginning of an activity, facilitators can introduce key terms through participatory methods, such as a definition-matching exercise, a collective glossary, or small-group discussions where participants compare how different terms are used in their languages and contexts. This avoids a purely didactic atmosphere and recognises participants as knowledge holders. It also makes space for the fact that language changes over time and may not evolve in the same way across countries, communities, and generations.

A useful tool is a Language Agreement, co-created by the group. This agreement can clarify which terms the group will use, how participants can ask for clarification, how they can correct themselves or others, and how the group will respond when language causes discomfort or harm. Such an agreement should remain open to revision. In this sense, shared language is not only about 'using the right words', but about building a process of accountability, repair, and mutual learning.

In digital spaces, including online platforms, social media, and messaging apps, language agreements become even more important. As outlined by ILGA (2024), social media platforms present specific risks for LGBTQIA+ people, such as the increased exposure to hate speech and/or suppression of contents because of the algorithm. Online communication can increase the risk of misinterpretation, hate speech, unwanted exposure, or the circulation of stories beyond their original context. Participants should therefore be supported to make informed choices about names, pronouns, images, privacy settings, and the visibility of their narratives. As in face-to-face activities, people should be referred to with the names, pronouns, and terms they choose for themselves, and facilitators should avoid cisnormative or heteronormative assumptions.

When storytelling is involved, control over language becomes an ethical issue. Participants must retain ownership over the words used to describe their identities and experiences. Facilitators, educators, editors, and communication teams should seek explicit consent before editing, paraphrasing, translating, publishing, or amplifying someone's story. This is especially important when stories concern trauma, migration, family rejection, discrimination, or legal and social vulnerability.

Finally, shared language should be understood as one concrete way of actively making spaces safer. It does not eliminate all risk, nor does it guarantee that every conversation will feel comfortable. However, it helps groups distinguish between harm and discomfort, create conditions for trust, and engage with disagreement in ways that are respectful, accountable, and oriented toward learning. This connects the glossary in this chapter with the broader discussion of safer and brave spaces developed in Chapter 4.

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03

LGBTQIA+ Code of Conduct for Youth Projects

(Sapling)



3.1 Introduction

A code of conduct for youth projects translates organisational values into concrete expectations for everyday behaviour, decision-making and responsibility. It should not function only as a statement of good intentions. Its purpose is to clarify how participants, facilitators, staff and partner organisations are expected to contribute to an environment based on dignity, respect, fairness and meaningful participation.

Within the Our Story project, the development of an LGBTQIA+ inclusive code of conduct is closely connected to the broader objective of creating more inclusive and LGBTQIA+ sensitive conditions within Erasmus+ activities. The project combines the development of shared language with an exchange of organisational practices and practical experimentation within international and local activities. The code of conduct therefore provides a bridge between the concepts introduced in Chapter 2 and their application in concrete youth-work settings.

A code of conduct is also a living document. Different groups, activities and local contexts may require different arrangements, and no written document can anticipate every situation. The principles presented in this chapter should therefore be accompanied by regular reflection, participant feedback and organisational learning.

3.2 Core principles and values

Non-discrimination

An LGBTQIA+ inclusive youth project explicitly rejects bullying, harassment, abuse, derogatory language, coercion and exclusion, including behaviour that takes place through digital communication. Participants should be able to take part without their sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, sex characteristics or other aspects of identity being treated as a problem, a source of ridicule or something that needs to be justified.

Non-discrimination also requires attention to less visible forms of exclusion. A project may formally welcome LGBTQIA+ participants while still reproducing assumptions about gender, relationships, families or bodies through its language, accommodation arrangements, examples, application forms or facilitation methods. Inclusive practice therefore requires facilitators and organisations to examine not only explicit behaviour but also the structures and routines through which activities are organised (European Commission, 2020; GLHV@ARCSHS, La Trobe University, 2016).

Intersectionality

As explained in Chapter 2, an intersectional approach recognises that sexuality and gender are only some of the social positions that shape a person's experience. Disability, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic position, faith, migration background, language, age, rurality and neurodiversity, among other factors, may interact with sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression in different ways.

For youth workers, this means avoiding the assumption that LGBTQIA+ participants form a homogeneous group. A practice that removes a barrier for one participant may not address the needs of another. An intersectional approach therefore asks who is able to participate, who may remain excluded, whose needs are easily recognised, and which barriers may be less visible.

Inclusion and participation

Inclusion is not achieved simply by allowing different people to enter the same space. It involves creating conditions in which participants have equitable opportunities to understand what is happening, contribute to activities, express needs, make choices and influence the learning process.

Participation should consequently be understood as voluntary and adaptable. Participants may engage differently depending on the topic, group dynamics, communication style, emotional state or level of trust. Facilitators should avoid interpreting quietness, temporary withdrawal or the decision not to share personal information as a lack of engagement. Providing different ways of participating can make the learning environment more accessible without lowering its educational objectives (Rainbow Youth 2.0, n.d.; UNICEF, 2022).

3.3 Safety, consent and privacy guidelines

The concept of safety used in this manual is based on the understanding of safer spaces introduced in Chapter 2. Complete safety cannot be guaranteed because people enter a group with different histories, needs, vulnerabilities, privileges and expectations. The responsibility of an organisation is therefore not to promise a completely safe environment, but to actively reduce avoidable harm and establish clear processes for responding when problems occur.

Consent is an important part of this approach. Participation in a youth project should not automatically imply consent to photographs, recordings, publication of creative work, sharing personal stories or discussing private experiences. These decisions should be explained separately and participants should understand what will happen with the information or material they provide.

Privacy requires particular attention in LGBTQIA+ youth work because participants may use different names or pronouns in different contexts, or may not disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity in every area of their lives. Unauthorised disclosure can therefore have consequences beyond the activity itself. Facilitators and organisations should minimise unnecessary collection and circulation of personal information and explain clearly how information will be used.

In practice, this includes providing appropriate data-protection information; requesting specific consent before taking or publishing photographs, videos or recordings; using the names and pronouns participants ask to be addressed by; offering anonymity or pseudonymity when stories or creative outputs are published; and establishing clear expectations concerning the sharing of personal information outside the group.

Confidentiality should also be discussed realistically. Participants can be asked not to share other people's personal stories outside the group, but facilitators should avoid promising absolute confidentiality if safeguarding or other organisational responsibilities may require intervention. The limits of confidentiality should therefore be communicated from the beginning.

3.4 Specific measures within Erasmus+ activities

Before the activity

Inclusive practice in Erasmus+ projects begins before participants enter the activity room.

Recruitment, communication, travel, accommodation, food, programme design and follow-up can all create or remove barriers. For this reason, inclusion should be considered throughout the full activity cycle rather than treated as an additional measure introduced only when a problem becomes visible.

Before the activity, calls for participation should use clear and accessible language and provide enough information for potential participants to understand the programme, venue, accommodation conditions, financial arrangements and expected level of participation. Outreach should go beyond organisations' usual networks where possible, particularly if relying only on established contacts would repeatedly reach the same groups.

Information about access or support needs should be collected early enough to allow reasonable adaptations. Participants should be given an opportunity to communicate relevant dietary, mobility, sensory, language or other needs without being required to disclose unnecessary personal information.

Accommodation arrangements require particular attention. Room allocation should not automatically divide participants according to assumed binary gender categories. Where rooms are shared, arrangements should consider participants' comfort, privacy and consent and should be communicated before arrival whenever possible.

During the activity

During the activity, facilitators should combine different modes and levels of participation. An entire programme based on plenary discussion may privilege participants who are comfortable speaking publicly and processing information quickly. Individual reflection, work in pairs, small-group activities and whole-group discussion should therefore be mixed throughout the programme. This approach allows participants to engage at different levels of exposure and is consistent with the methodological diversity discussed further in Chapter 9.

Facilitators are also responsible for modelling inclusive language. Names and pronouns should not be inferred from appearance, and it should be normal to ask again when someone is unsure rather than avoiding a person's name or guessing. This practice was deliberately used during the Our Story international training activities: asking again was treated as an ordinary part of respectful communication rather than as an exceptional or embarrassing situation.

Pronoun sharing should nevertheless not become compulsory disclosure. Facilitators can create opportunities for participants to communicate how they wish to be addressed while leaving space for someone not to provide information they do not wish to share.

Mistakes may occur. In the case of accidental misgendering or incorrect use of a name, a brief correction and continuation of the conversation is usually more appropriate than drawing prolonged attention to the mistake or requiring the affected person to reassure the speaker. Repeated, dismissive or intentional behaviour requires a different response and should be addressed through the group's agreements and the organisation's anti-discrimination procedures.

Other practical measures include maintaining accessible programme information, providing regular breaks, offering a quieter space where feasible, identifying a person participants can approach for support, providing inclusive dietary options, and adapting pace or communication where this supports participation.

After the activity

After the activity, inclusion should remain part of evaluation and follow-up. Participants should be able to provide feedback through more than one format where possible, including options that do not require speaking publicly. Before photographs, stories, quotations or creative outputs are disseminated, publication arrangements and existing consent should be checked again where appropriate. Facilitators and organisers should also review what they learned and identify changes that need to be incorporated into future activities.

3.5 Inclusion frameworks and practices to avoid

Inclusive youth work can be understood through three related principles: it is intersectional, intentional and ongoing. Inclusion requires attention to different and overlapping identities; it must be incorporated deliberately into programme design rather than expected to emerge automatically; and it requires continuous review as participants, contexts and organisational practices change.

Commitment to inclusion does not prevent misunderstandings or ineffective practices. Some approaches may appear inclusive while continuing to reproduce barriers. The following are therefore presented explicitly as assumptions and practices to avoid, rather than as recommendations.

Equating inclusion with special treatment.

At some times, people assume that supporting LGBTQIA+ inclusion means privileging LGBTQIA+ young people over others. In fact, inclusion is about ensuring fair and equitable access, treatment, and opportunities for all young people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

Treating LGBTQIA+ participants as a homogeneous group.

People who share an LGBTQIA+ identity may have very different experiences, needs, political views, cultural backgrounds and relationships with their identity. Programmes should therefore avoid expecting individuals to represent an entire community.

Ignoring intersectionality.

A programme may be inclusive in relation to sexuality or gender while remaining inaccessible because of disability, language, socioeconomic barriers, racism, migration status or other factors. Inclusion should therefore be considered across multiple dimensions.

Treating LGBTQIA+ topics as inherently inappropriate or controversial.

Avoiding sexual orientation or gender identity does not create neutrality. It may instead reproduce the assumption that heterosexuality and cisgender identities are the default. Discussions should be appropriate to the context and participants, but LGBTQIA+ identities should not be treated as intrinsically unsuitable subjects.

Assuming that good intentions remove the need for learning.

Seeing oneself as accepting or non-discriminatory does not automatically provide the knowledge and facilitation skills required for LGBTQIA+ inclusive youth work. Terminology, community realities and good practices change, and organisations need mechanisms for continued learning.

These risks can be addressed through training, reflection, participant involvement and organisational review. Inclusion is therefore better understood as a practice that organisations continuously develop than as a status that they permanently achieve.

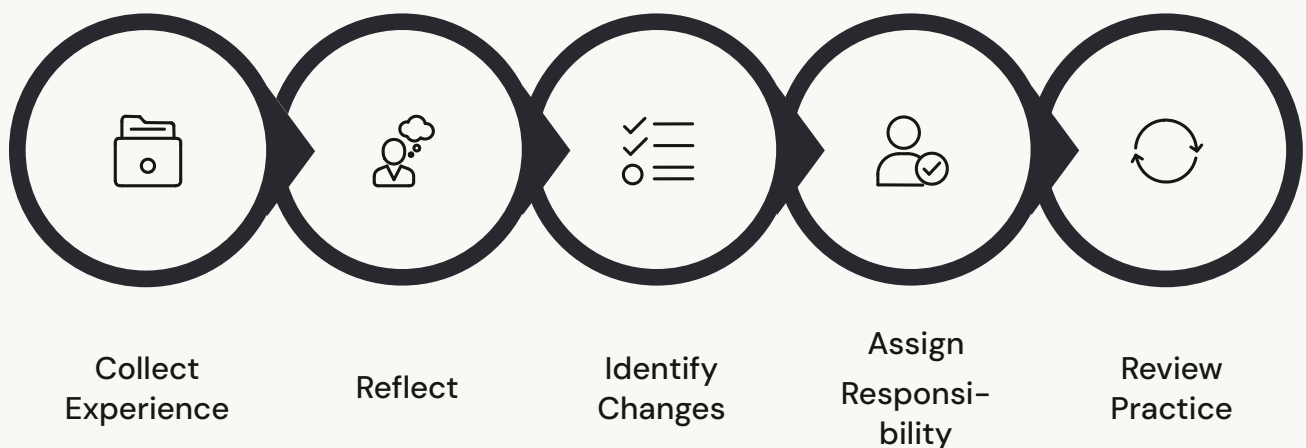
3.6 Tools for organisational transformation and learning

Inclusive activities have greater long-term value when the learning generated through them becomes part of organisational practice. A successful individual workshop does not necessarily produce organisational change. For this to happen, experience needs to be documented, interpreted collectively and translated into decisions.

Reflection and evaluation are central to this process. They should not be limited to a questionnaire distributed at the end of an activity. Chapter 9 discusses reflection in greater depth as an ongoing and participatory process through which experience is interpreted, learning is recognised and different perspectives can be connected. It also demonstrates why reflective methods should vary: individual reflection, small-group exchange, embodied methods, creative tools, structured feedback and instruments such as Youthpass serve different purposes and enable different forms of participation.

At organisational level, the same principle applies. Participant evaluations can identify how an activity was experienced, while facilitator debriefs can examine group dynamics and methodological choices. Peer-learning sessions can allow colleagues who did not participate directly to understand what was learned. Documentation can preserve methods and adaptations so that they are not lost when staff change. These processes become particularly useful when they lead to a review of concrete organisational practices, such as registration forms, accommodation procedures, codes of conduct, safeguarding measures, communication standards or accessibility procedures.

A practical organisational learning cycle can therefore move from collecting experience, to reflecting on what it means, to identifying changes, assigning responsibility for implementing them, and finally reviewing whether those changes improved practice.



This cycle outlines the continuous process of organisational learning, from gathering insights to implementing and reviewing improvements.

The outcome does not need to be a large policy revision. It may be a change to an application form, a new question about accessibility, clearer instructions for facilitators, a different approach to accommodation, or a regular team reflection process.

Capacity-building should likewise be understood as more than attendance at external training. Coaching, supervision, mentoring, peer learning, study visits and internal knowledge-sharing can help organisations retain and develop knowledge. Participatory decision-making can additionally involve participants and community members in identifying priorities rather than asking them only to evaluate decisions that have already been made.

This approach reflects the wider methodology of Our Story, in which international exchange, local application, reflection and the development of shared outputs are interconnected. Organisational transformation occurs when learning from individual activities is not treated as an isolated experience but is incorporated into future practice.

3.7 Conclusion

An LGBTQIA+ inclusive code of conduct is useful only when its principles are visible in the actual organisation of a project. Non-discrimination, intersectionality, inclusion, consent and privacy need to shape recruitment, accommodation, facilitation, communication, evaluation and organisational learning.

The code should therefore remain open to review as groups and contexts change. Its role is not to eliminate every difficult situation, but to provide a shared framework through which participants and organisers can recognise expectations, respond to problems and continuously improve their practice. Chapter 4 develops this approach further by examining how these principles can be translated into safer, brave and accessible learning environments.

04

Creating Safer, Brave and Accessible Spaces

(Sapling)



4.1 Introduction

The terms safer space, brave space and accessible space describe related but distinct dimensions of an inclusive learning environment. As established in Chapter 2, a safer space is a physical, digital or relational environment that is actively and continuously co-created to reduce avoidable harm, discrimination, ridicule and exclusion. The manual deliberately uses safer rather than safe because complete safety cannot be guaranteed for every participant in every situation.

Safer space

A safer space is a physical, digital or relational environment that is actively and continuously co-created to reduce avoidable harm, discrimination, ridicule and exclusion. The manual deliberately uses safer rather than safe because complete safety cannot be guaranteed for every participant in every situation.

Brave space

A brave space recognises another aspect of the learning process: meaningful conversations about identity, discrimination, privilege or power can involve uncertainty, disagreement and discomfort. The aim is therefore not to remove all discomfort, but to enable participants to engage with difficult issues respectfully while distinguishing productive challenge from behaviour that causes or reproduces harm.

Accessibility adds a further question: who is actually able to enter, understand, participate in and remain engaged with the space? Physical access, language, communication, sensory conditions, neurodiversity, financial resources and programme design all influence participation.

These three dimensions should be understood together. A space can be welcoming in its language but physically inaccessible; accessible in its venue but unsafe for someone whose privacy is repeatedly ignored; or protective to the extent that participants have little opportunity to discuss difficult issues. Inclusive youth work therefore requires attention to care, challenge and accessibility simultaneously.

Safer and brave spaces in practice

Safer spaces are necessary because inclusive intentions alone do not prevent exclusion. Participants may enter youth projects having previously experienced misgendering, discrimination, involuntary disclosure, inaccessible environments or a lack of affirmation in other settings. At the same time, participants within the same group may have very different experiences and expectations. Facilitators should therefore avoid assuming that people feel safe simply because the activity describes itself as LGBTQIA+ friendly (Butler, 2020; European Commission, 2020).

The purpose of a safer-space approach is to establish conditions that reduce avoidable harm and make it possible to respond when something goes wrong. This can include clear boundaries, participatory group agreements, accessible communication, active listening, opportunities to step away from an activity, a designated support person and, where possible, a quiet space for participants who need time away from group interaction.

A brave-space approach complements rather than replaces these measures. Discussions may involve disagreement, mistakes or strong emotions, and learning cannot always be separated from discomfort. However, discomfort and harm are not equivalent. Participants should not be expected to tolerate harassment, discrimination, forced disclosure or debate about their basic dignity in the name of being "brave". Facilitators have a responsibility to recognise this distinction and intervene when necessary (Ulex Project, n.d.).

Creating safer and brave spaces is consequently an ongoing process rather than a condition established once at the beginning of a programme. Group dynamics change, new needs may emerge and agreements that worked initially may need to be revisited.

4.2 Group agreements, boundaries and collective responsibility

Group agreements are one of the practical foundations of safer and brave spaces. They establish shared expectations concerning participation and behaviour and provide a reference point when misunderstandings or conflicts occur.

Group agreements differ from rules imposed entirely by facilitators because participants are involved in shaping them. At the beginning of an activity, the group can be invited to identify what people need in order to participate, what behaviours support learning and what should happen when an agreement is not respected. The resulting agreements should be concrete enough to guide behaviour and should remain open to revision as the group develops.

Facilitators may nevertheless need to bring some non-negotiable organisational principles into the process. Anti-discrimination requirements, safeguarding responsibilities and rules concerning consent or privacy should not depend solely on whether the group proposes them spontaneously. The participatory element lies in discussing how these principles will function in practice and allowing participants to add other needs and expectations.

Useful agreements may address:

- respecting people's names and pronouns and asking again when unsure;
- avoiding assumptions about identities and relationships;
- respecting confidentiality, together with clearly explained safeguarding limits;
- asking for consent before photographs, videos or recordings are made or shared;
- allowing only one person to speak at a time where this supports the group;
- listening without interrupting;
- recognising the right not to participate in a particular exercise or disclosure;
- using a "step up/step back" principle so that people who speak frequently make space for others;
- communicating the need for breaks or temporary withdrawal;
- using content notes where an activity may involve particularly sensitive material;
- distinguishing good intentions from responsibility for the impact of one's actions.

Group agreements are most useful when they remain visible and usable. They can be displayed in the room or shared digitally and revisited when group dynamics change, after a conflict, or when participants identify a new need. Revisiting an agreement should not be understood as evidence that the group has failed; it is part of maintaining the space collectively.

Non-verbal communication

Some groups use hand signals to support communication, particularly during larger discussions. These can make it easier to request clarification, indicate agreement or signal a technical issue without interrupting the speaker. For example, a group might use a raised hand to request the floor, a hand forming the letter C to request clarification, or a T-shaped gesture to indicate a technical point or time-out. If the group chooses to use a gesture such as shaking or raising both hands to indicate agreement, its meaning should be explained explicitly.

There is no need to reproduce a supposedly universal set of signals. In particular, the same gesture should never be presented as meaning both agreement and disagreement. If a group wants a non-verbal disagreement signal, it should define a separate one together.

Hand signals should only be used when they are accessible to the group. They may not work for participants with visual impairments or some mobility-related access needs, and gestures may have different meanings across cultural contexts. A verbal or other accessible alternative should therefore always remain available.

Trust-building practices can strengthen the function of group agreements. Regular check-ins, collaborative activities and opportunities to express needs help participants practise consent, boundary-setting and communication rather than treating these concepts only as written rules.

4.3 Approaches to conflict mediation and community care

Group agreements as a foundation

Group agreements can prevent some avoidable conflicts by making expectations explicit, but they cannot remove disagreement or harmful behaviour entirely. When a difficult situation arises, the agreements provide a shared reference point: facilitators and participants can identify what happened, which expectations are relevant and whether an existing agreement needs to be clarified or changed.

Groups should also have ways of raising concerns before they escalate. Depending on the activity, these may include an anonymous question or feedback box, regular reflection groups, individual check-ins or access to a designated support person. The important element is that participants know how concerns can be raised and what facilitators will do with the information they receive.

These mechanisms do not guarantee that conflict will be avoided. Their purpose is to make concerns easier to identify and to provide clearer and fairer processes for responding.

Conflict, power and social context

Conflict should not always be interpreted only as a disagreement between individuals. Group tensions can also be influenced by differences in power, privilege, marginalisation and social position. An intersectional and anti-oppressive perspective therefore asks not only what happened, but also who is carrying the consequences, whose perspective is being centred, and whether wider patterns of racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, classism or other forms of exclusion are influencing the situation.

This distinction is particularly important when a situation is described as a "debate". Not every conflict involves participants with equal power or equal exposure to harm. Facilitators should avoid creating circumstances in which a person affected by discrimination is expected to defend their identity, educate the person responsible for the harm, or remain in a discussion that compromises their dignity or safety.

When harm occurs

Harmful remarks, harassment or discriminatory behaviour should be addressed clearly. An immediate response may be required to stop the behaviour and support the person or people affected. The facilitator can name which behaviour is problematic without turning the intervention into a public judgement of the person's entire character.

Longer-term accountability does not need to rely solely on shame or punishment. Depending on the severity of the situation and the wishes and safety of those affected, appropriate responses may include individual conversations, reflective exercises, additional education, revisiting group agreements, restorative processes, changes to facilitation or organisational follow-up. Responsibility for educating others should not automatically be transferred to the person who experienced the harm.

Facilitators also need to reflect on their own role. Personal triggers, assumptions, bias or defensiveness can affect how a conflict is interpreted. Where possible, difficult incidents should therefore be reviewed by the facilitation team rather than relying entirely on one person's immediate judgement.

When mediation is not appropriate

Mediation is not an appropriate response to every situation. Active harassment, bullying, coercion or an immediate safety concern may require direct intervention and safeguarding measures before any dialogue is considered.

Mediation also depends on meaningful and voluntary participation. Where there is a serious power imbalance, continuing coercion or insufficient safety for the affected person, attempting to bring both parties together may reproduce rather than resolve harm. In such cases, boundary-setting, protection and organisational action take priority.

Conflict mediation in LGBTQIA+ inclusive spaces should therefore not aim to force harmony. Its purpose is to provide ways of addressing tension and disagreement while protecting participants from further harm and maintaining accountability within the group.

4.4 Accessibility considerations

Accessibility is a core component of LGBTQIA+ inclusion. It concerns the practical conditions that determine whether participants can enter the activity, understand what is happening, communicate, rest, contribute and remain involved with dignity.

Language and communication

Inclusive communication involves both terminology and accessibility. Facilitators should use gender-neutral language when they do not know how a person wishes to be addressed, avoid assumptions about families, relationships, bodies or sexual behaviour, and make it normal to ask for a name or pronouns again when unsure.

At the same time, participants should not be pressured to disclose pronouns or other identity-related information. The objective is to make self-definition possible, not compulsory.

When participants use different first languages, communication should also take account of language proficiency. Facilitators can speak clearly, limit unnecessary jargon, provide written or visual support, allow additional processing time and create opportunities for clarification. Participants who are less confident speaking in the working language should have meaningful ways to contribute without being continually required to speak in plenary.

The methodological diversity discussed in Chapter 9 is relevant here. Combining individual work, pairs or small groups and plenary activities allows people to participate at different levels of exposure and through different communication styles. Reflection and participation therefore become more accessible when the programme does not rely exclusively on fast verbal discussion.

Physical, sensory and neurodivergent access

Accessibility should be considered when selecting venues and planning programme conditions. Relevant considerations may include wheelchair access, accessible toilets, gender-neutral toilets, seating arrangements, quiet spaces, lighting, noise levels and the accessibility of accommodation and activity rooms.

Not every venue will allow every barrier to be removed. Where limitations remain, they should be communicated clearly before the activity so that participants can make informed decisions and discuss possible adaptations.

Some adjustments can be introduced independently of the venue. Depending on participants' needs and available resources, these may include sign-language interpretation, written or visual materials, earplugs, sensory or stimulating objects, predictable programme structures, regular breaks, flexible seating or alternative participation formats.

Facilitators should avoid assuming what participants need. Access needs are better identified through communication before and during the activity, followed by adaptation where possible.

Financial and structural barriers

Financial conditions also influence accessibility. Transport costs, participation fees, food, accommodation, materials and the timing of activities can determine who is realistically able to participate. These factors can interact with disability, migration status, housing insecurity, education, employment and family circumstances.

Organisers should therefore consider not only whether participation is formally open, but also what resources a person needs in order to attend. Clear information about reimbursements, travel arrangements and costs should be provided in advance, and unnecessary financial barriers should be reduced where the project framework allows.

Accessibility should ultimately be approached as a process of anticipation, communication, adaptation and review. It begins during outreach and registration, continues through travel, accommodation and programme delivery, and remains relevant during evaluation and dissemination.

4.5 Conclusion

Safer, brave and accessible spaces are not created by a label placed on an activity. They depend on concrete facilitation choices, group processes and organisational arrangements.

Safer-space practice focuses on reducing avoidable harm and responding to problems; brave-space practice makes room for learning, disagreement and appropriate challenge; accessibility asks who can actually participate and under what conditions. Group agreements, conflict-response procedures and practical adaptations connect these principles to everyday youth work.

Within Our Story, these practices are particularly important because storytelling may involve identity, personal experience and different levels of self-disclosure. Participants can engage meaningfully in storytelling only when they retain appropriate control over how they participate, what they share and how their contribution may subsequently be used. Creating these conditions is therefore not separate from storytelling methodology: it is part of the methodological foundation on which inclusive storytelling depends.

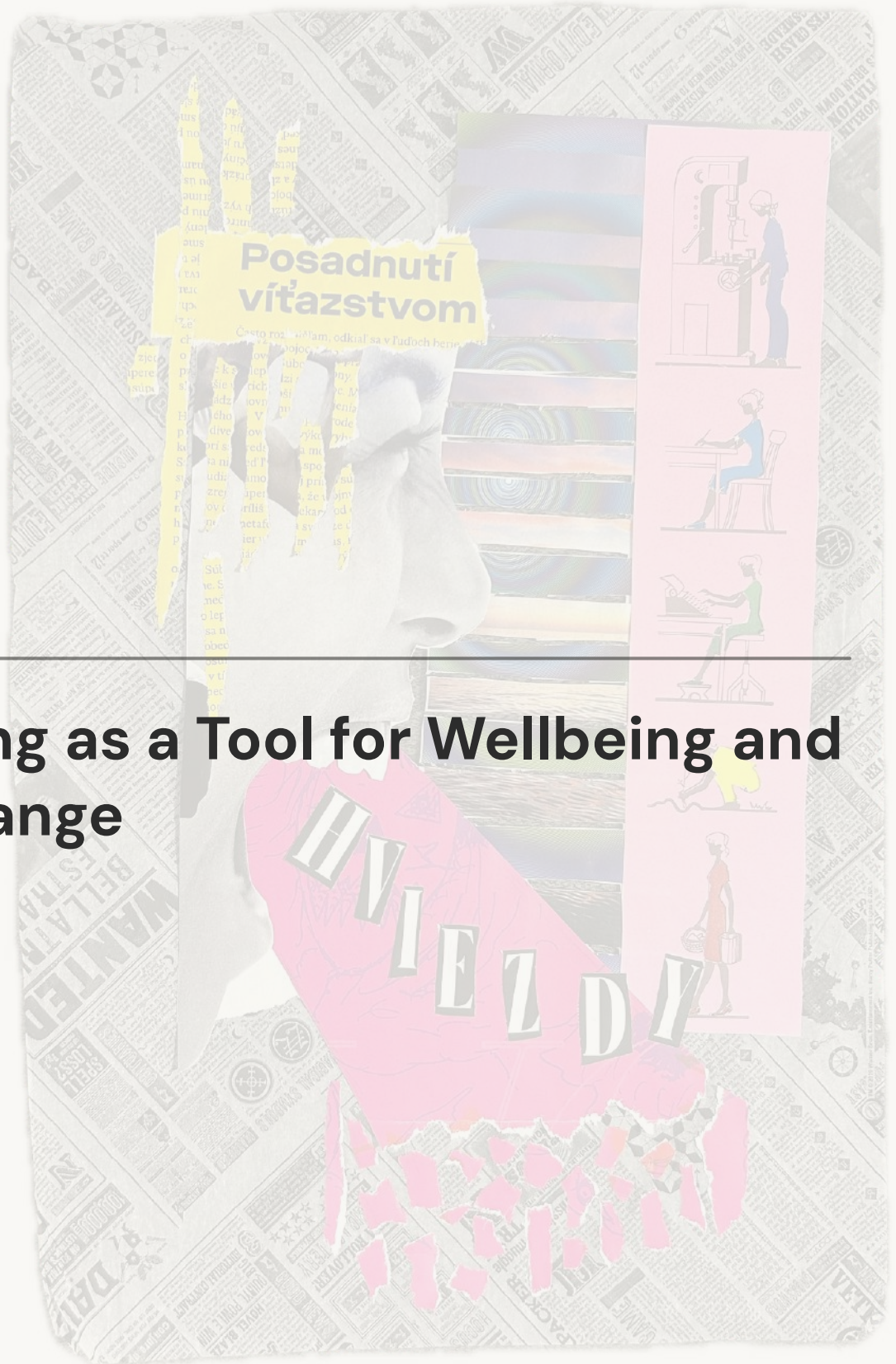
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05

Storytelling as a Tool for Wellbeing and Social Change

(Prague Pride)



5.1 Introduction

This chapter examines how storytelling can support the wellbeing, participation and social visibility of LGBTQIA+ young people when used responsibly in youth work. It follows the main stages and dimensions of storytelling. It first considers the contribution of LGBTQIA+ storytelling to empowerment, visibility and representation. It then introduces principles of participatory and ethical practice, including agency, narrative ownership, ongoing consent, risk assessment and respect for unresolved or non-linear narratives.

The following sections address story collection, editing and dissemination, with attention to accessibility, intersectionality, power relations and the preservation of the storyteller's intended meaning. The chapter also examines face-to-face storytelling, where direct interaction with an audience can create both connection and potential harm. The final section reflects on the responsibilities of youth workers and facilitators and on how their identities, assumptions and institutional roles shape the process.

Together, these sections provide a framework for assessing whether a storytelling initiative is participatory, inclusive and ethically responsible. The principles can be applied to written, visual, digital, performative and face-to-face formats and prepare the ground for Chapter 6, where they are translated into practical non-formal education methods and artistic activities developed within the Our Story project.

Stories are not merely a means of conveying information or providing entertainment; there is much more to them than that. Among other things, they give us insight into the lives of others—their worries, joys, behaviours, or ways of handling situations. Through them, children and young people learn what behaviour is expected of men and women, as well as what is typically expected of men toward women and of women toward men. However, there are currently very few stories where queer people are the main characters.

Such stories have the potential not only to enrich the mosaic of human experience with fragments of the diverse experiences of queer people, but also to show other queer people—especially young ones—that they are not alone and that many others may be dealing with similar issues. One way to pass on the experiences of queer people is through storytelling. The goal is not to "give them a voice"—they already have one—but to provide them with a safest space possible where they can decide whether to use it.

5.2 Why queer storytelling matters

There are many myths, half-truths, and stereotypes circulating among people regarding queer individuals and their lives. These are often based on prejudice and the pathologisation of queer identities. However, when we listen to the stories of people from a different sociocultural background than our own, or with a different sexual orientation or gender identity than ours, we often find that we are all essentially dealing with similar issues. Moreover, for queer youth, telling their own story can also be an act of self-empowerment. Storytelling serves three main functions in the lives of queer young people: empowerment, visibility, and representation.

- **Empowerment: Reclaiming the narrative**

For much of history, stories about queer people have been told by others — by lawmakers, clinicians, religious authorities, and journalists who defined queer lives primarily through pathology, deviance, or tragedy. Many queer young people today still grow up absorbing those inherited narratives, internalising the idea that their identity is something to be explained, justified, or overcome. When a young person tells their own story, in their own words, on their own terms, something shifts. The act of narrating a life — choosing what to include, how to frame it, what meaning to draw from it — is itself an act of agency. It says: I am the authority on my own experience. This is not a small thing for someone who may have spent years being told, implicitly or explicitly, that their inner life is wrong. Storytelling in this sense is not about performing resilience or producing a tidy redemption arc. It is about the dignity of being the subject of your own story rather than the object of someone else's.

- **Visibility: You are not alone**

Research suggests that exposure to positive LGBTQ representation can serve as a resilience factor for queer young people—promoting self-esteem, a sense of community, and coping with negative (Craig et al., 2015; Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011). Young people themselves report that seeing their own identities represented in the media benefits their well-being (The Trevor Project, 2022). Also, online spaces are important for young queer people, as they offer access to role models that are absent from mainstream media (McInroy & Craig, 2017). When stories are shared within a group, a community, or more widely, they create a kind of connective tissue. They say: this happened, it is real, and someone survived it, or celebrated it, or is still figuring it out, just like you. Visibility is not vanity. It is infrastructure — without roads, goods cannot reach markets. Without electricity, nothing switches on. Without the visibility of queer lives, a queer young person cannot easily name themselves — if you grow up without any image of who you are, you may lack the language to make sense of your own experience. Many queer people describe years of confusion not because they did not know what they felt, but because they had no word, no story, no face to attach it to. Visibility also matters for the communities around queer young people. When a young person's family reads a story about a young gay man finding acceptance, or a school sees a film made by their own trans students, the effect can be more powerful than any policy document or training session. Stories build empathy in ways that statistics rarely do.

- **Representation: Whose stories get told**

Representation is not just about presence — it is about how and who. A community organisation that collects only stories of coming out, or only stories of triumph over adversity, is still imposing a frame. Queer lives are also ordinary: boring Tuesdays, complicated friendships, uncertainty about career choices, grief for grandparents, ambivalence about identity labels that never quite fit. Stories that capture this full texture of life are more honest, and ultimately more radical, than stories that ask queer young people to be perpetually extraordinary. Pay particular attention to whose stories are not being collected. Queer young people of colour, queer youth with disabilities, those from rural areas or conservative or religious backgrounds, those who are non-binary or gender non-conforming, those who are undocumented or in care — these people are often underrepresented even in LGBTQ spaces that consider themselves inclusive. Good storytelling practice asks, continuously: who is not in this room, and why?

Principles of Participatory and Ethical Storytelling

Principles of Participatory and Ethical Storytelling

Participatory storytelling means that the people whose lives are being narrated are active agents in the process — not just sources of material. The following principles should guide every storytelling project you undertake.

- **Agency and ownership**

The storyteller owns their story. They have the right to retract it, change it, or remain anonymous at any stage of the process. If a story is going to be used in a funding bid, a conference presentation, or a social media campaign, the storyteller knows this and has explicitly agreed to it — for each specific use.

- **Ongoing consent**

Young people should receive clear and accessible information about how their story will be used, who will have access to it, the format in which it will appear, and the rights they retain throughout the process. They should be able to revise or withdraw their consent regarding the content, form of identification, or dissemination of the story without negative consequences for their relationship with the organisation. Consent should therefore be treated as an ongoing process rather than as a single formal agreement. Before each new use or publication, facilitators should confirm that the storyteller continues to agree with the proposed form and context of sharing.

- **Safety first**

The "digital footprint" risk should be assessed. Will this story impact their safety at home, their school life, or their future employment? Before any story is disseminated, work through these questions with the storyteller:

Could this story, even anonymised, be identifiable to family members, school staff, or other people who might react harmfully?

Does this story disclose experiences of abuse, self-harm, or other sensitive material that could put the young person at risk if attributed to them?

Has the young person considered how they might feel about this story being publicly available in five or ten years, when their circumstances or sense of identity may have changed?

These are not reasons to avoid storytelling, but reasons to build time and space for proper reflection into your process.

Queer storytelling has the potential to promote acceptance of LGBTQ people, but there is always a risk of rejection or cisheteronormative reactions from the audience.

- **Non-linear narratives**

Respect that queer stories don't always have a "happy ending" or a "coming out" climax. Honour the messiness, the "in-between," and the unresolved. But remember that trauma is not a commodity. There is a difference between creating space for a young person to tell a difficult story on their own terms and actively soliciting painful material because it makes for a more compelling narrative. Ask yourself, and ask your team: are we drawn to difficult stories because they serve the young person, or because they are more likely to move an audience, secure funding, or generate media coverage? If it is the latter, that is a problem.

- **Inclusivity in Story Collection, Editing, and Dissemination**

Inclusivity in storytelling is active, not passive. It requires deliberate choices at every stage of the process.

Story collection

Not every young person finds verbal storytelling natural or accessible. Offer multiple formats: written narrative, recorded audio, photography, illustration, video, zines, poetry, digital media, collage, or performance. Some young people will flourish in group storytelling workshops; others will only share in a one-to-one setting. Some may not be ready to share at all, and that is entirely valid.

Practical barriers to participation are real. Consider whether your sessions are physically accessible, whether you are providing travel support, whether sessions are held at times that work for young people who have caring responsibilities or irregular work schedules, and whether your space is genuinely safe — not just officially welcoming, but actually free of the dynamics that make queer young people, particularly those with intersecting marginalised identities, feel invisible or tokenised. If you want to include people with disabilities, it's important to know that accessibility isn't just about stairs. It's a good idea to coordinate things personally so that, for example, you know if someone needs to have a ticket purchased in advance in order to attend, since they don't have the money and paying after the event would be a barrier to their participation.

“ They should respect diversity. I would be cautious if I noticed any dismissive or disrespectful language toward a marginalised group, or if there was obvious gatekeeping regarding the nature of the experience, e.g., requiring the trans experience to be binary, or limiting participation to people who want sterilisation. It's good to have a diversity of experiences, and I understand that sometimes there's a demand for a specific topic, but if the storyteller's selection is based on something like "we want a trans person who has undergone sterilisation because we think they aren't truly trans otherwise," then I see that as a problem.

trans storyteller ”

Be honest about the facilitators' position. A team of cisgender adult facilitators asking trans youth to share their stories must carefully consider the power dynamics within the group and reflect on their biases and preconceptions as honestly as possible. The relationship is already loaded with asymmetry — adult/young person, cisgender/trans, professional/service user — and young people are perceptive about these dynamics. Facilitators may carry unexamined assumptions about what a trans story should look like, unconsciously signalling which narratives are welcome and which are not, with the result that young people tell the story they sense is wanted rather than the one that is truly theirs. Trans young people also frequently bear the burden of having to educate facilitators about basic aspects of their identity before any real storytelling can begin — a costly and dehumanising repositioning from narrator to explainer. Where trans voices are scarce within a group, there is a further risk of tokenism: an implicit pressure to represent an entire community rather than simply one life.

Good practice means substantive ongoing education, transparency about limitations, separating storytelling from service delivery, and developing the capacity to receive whatever story arrives rather than the one anticipated. The goal is genuine curiosity and accountability, not the performance of competence. It is advisable to have access to queer-friendly, informed supervision or other forms of support for the team and the storyteller as well.

When it comes to casting the storytellers, it's a good idea to sit down with them and get to know them better. It's especially important to determine whether they've processed their experiences—so that they aren't dealing with fresh trauma—and whether they have realistic expectations and respect for diversity.

“ It can be interesting to link the story with visuals. We usually have certain images from our lives in our heads; when we tell a story, we translate those into a verbal description, and the people listening then somehow transform those words back into their own mental images and, if applicable, connect them to their own experiences. After all, drawings or cut-out pictures allow for some symbolic work and help highlight key points.

trans storyteller ”

Story editing

The instinct to "improve" a story — to correct grammar, smooth syntax, impose a more conventional narrative arc — can subtly erase the specific texture of a young person's voice. But the voice is meaning.

“Every story has a beginning—it often describes what things were like before a complication arises, then what that complication led to, and finally some resolution and conclusion... It's usually a good idea to include some details in the narrative so that people can better visualise it or connect more deeply with the story.

trans storyteller”

Where editing is necessary — for clarity, for safety, or for the requirements of a particular format — it should be done collaboratively, with the storyteller reading and approving each change. Never edit a story without the storyteller's knowledge. Never edit in ways that change the emotional or political meaning of what was shared.

It's also worth mentioning the language used by queer storytellers. It's best to let them speak in the language they're accustomed to and to address their language sensitively and respectfully only in cases where they use terms that are derogatory toward themselves, their community, their group, or the public. But do not scrub out the anger, the slang, or the specific "queer-coded" language.

Story dissemination

Before publication, facilitators should assess the platform and its potential risks. When stories are shared on social media, comments should be moderated to reduce exposure to hate speech and harassment. The long-term accessibility of online content should also be considered, as published material may remain available beyond its original context. Stories should not be framed in ways that sentimentalise hardship, reduce people to their vulnerability, or use personal experiences primarily to provoke an emotional response. Instead, they should be situated within the broader context of social change and the need for systemic support.

Face-to-face storytelling

Unlike a blog post or a pre-recorded video, F2F storytelling is a living exchange where the listener is as much a part of the story as the teller. In the context of working with queer youth, this immediacy can be healing – when the teller sees the listener's nods, smiles, or tears, this validates their experience in real-time, but it also requires a high level of intentionality from the facilitator.

When stories are told face-to-face, listeners respond not only to the words being spoken but also to tone of voice, pauses, facial expressions and body language. Some studies suggest that, during attentive listening, patterns of brain activity between speakers and listeners may partly align. However, this finding should not be treated as a direct or universal explanation of empathy. Rather, it indicates that storytelling can support attention, emotional engagement and a shared understanding between the storyteller and the audience.

A significant portion of the story is also told through tone of voice, pauses, and body language. These cues provide context that text alone cannot capture, helping to convey the nuance of complex emotions.

As a facilitator, your job is to create a space where the story can exist safely without being crushed by judgment or redirected by others' agendas. You also need to be prepared for the possibility of a negative reaction and know how to handle the situation.

The storyteller or listener may be triggered by the story, so it's good to know how to handle this—for example, by letting the audience know in advance that they can leave if the story becomes uncomfortable for them and letting the storyteller know that they don't have to go into territory they're not comfortable with. During the storytelling, if someone shows signs of distress, you might ask if they're okay. It's a good idea to hold a debriefing or something similar after the event.

I had an experience where I felt that everyone else at the Living Library was relatively fine, but I, as a trans person, was subjected to a series of transphobic remarks, and then there wasn't even a debriefing.

trans storyteller

A Note on Your Own Role

As youth workers, we are not neutral conveyors of other people's stories. We bring our own identities, assumptions, and blind spots to every storytelling space we create. If you are not queer yourself, reflect regularly on how your positionality shapes the dynamics of the work. If you are queer, do not assume that shared identity removes the power differential between you and the young people you work with — it does not.

The best storytelling work comes from practitioners who are genuinely curious, genuinely humble, and genuinely accountable — to the young people they work with, to the communities those young people belong to, and to the ongoing, imperfect project of getting it less wrong over time.

Stories have power. Handle them accordingly.



06

Inclusive Artistic Practices

(Prague Pride)

6.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of non-formal education methods focused on queer storytelling and supporting the well-being of LGBTQIA+ youth. We begin with a brief summary of the theoretical foundations of non-formal education (NFE) and participatory pedagogy in youth work, highlighting key principles such as voluntariness, inclusion, participation, and emotional engagement (Council of Europe, 2026). . We then show why queer storytelling is essential for strengthening the confidence, visibility, and sense of belonging of queer young people (SALTO-YOUTH, 2025; Stiftung Digitale Chancen, 2025).

The chapter presents a set of workshop methods organized across the different phases of the storytelling process, from trust-building and reflection to creative expression, co-creation, sharing, and social context. Each activity is described through step-by-step facilitation instructions with its aim, timing, materials, and a short explanation of its link to storytelling.

The chapter also includes short introductory texts for each phase, explaining its role in the overall framework. In addition, it provides a glossary of key terms to help less experienced readers understand the concepts used throughout the manual.

The methods and recommendations draw primarily on Erasmus+, Council of Europe documents, and practices developed through international and national youth-work projects and resources (Council of Europe, 2026; SALTO-YOUTH, 2019; Stiftung Digitale Chancen, 2025; Youth Work Ireland, 2023).

6.1.1 Theoretical Framework

Non-formal Education (NFE)

Non-formal education (NFE) in youth work is characterized by voluntariness, planning, and the intentional development of skills outside the formal school system [1]. According to the Council of Europe (2026), NFE includes "a planned, structured process of personal and social education for young people" that takes place outside formal curricula (Council of Europe, 2026, "Non-formal Education in EYF Supported Projects" section, para. 3). Key features of this approach include activities based on the needs and interests of participants, openness to their input, connection to real life, and clearly defined goals (Council of Europe, 2026). NFE methods are flexible, participatory, and oriented toward peer learning; they often combine individual and group learning and emphasize the mutual exchange of experience (Council of Europe, 2026). The core is active engagement, learning by doing and reflection, with participants learning through experience followed by individual and collective reflection (Council of Europe, 2026). Emphasis is placed on developing lifelong skills and preparing for democratic citizenship, working with the whole person (emotions, cognition, body) (Council of Europe, 2026).

Participatory Pedagogy

Participatory pedagogy in this context means that young people are not passive recipients of information but cocreate the educational process and dialogue. Working with queer youth requires facilitators to share power and support young people's own initiative. This involves continuously co-creating safer spaces (Chapter 2 and 4) in which avoidable harm is reduced and participants retain control over how, when and whether they express themselves, and shift between the roles of expert and partner (Council of Europe, 2025 ; SALTO-YOUTH, 2019). Youth work and NFE documents highlight the importance of conscious inclusion and openness toward marginalized groups, including LGBTQIA+ people—it is necessary to actively seek the participation of those who are often excluded (Council of Europe, 2026). A "safer space" means fostering openness, mutual respect, confidentiality, and minimizing any potentially retraumatizing influences (SALTO-YOUTH, 2019; Stiftung Digitale Chancen, 2025). According to the SALTO Toolbox, for example, the Guideline – Creation of Safe Spaces project states: "The guide provides practical tools for creating safe and inclusive spaces that support personal growth, emotional resilience, and social connection" (SALTO-YOUTH, 2019). Participants should have genuine choice (never forcing open sharing), understand the purpose of activities, and receive support (e.g., from the facilitator or peer group) in moments of stress or unexpected emotions. This includes good practice in coaching, debriefing, and ensuring access to follow-up psychosocial support (see later sections).

Queer Storytelling

The specifics of queer storytelling also draw on principles of queer pedagogy—approaches that challenge dominant narratives and norms, emphasize identity fluidity, and support finding one's own voice (SALTO-YOUTH, 2025; SALTO-YOUTH, 2019). Storytelling in queer youth work enables exploration of experiences such as coming out, discrimination, or searching for community in a safe context. As the authors of the QueeResilience project note, "Storytelling helps queer young people feel less isolated and more understood—it shows them that others face similar challenges and that they are not alone in their situation" (SALTO-YOUTH, 2025). Storytelling activates emotions and identification with protagonists, and it teaches critical thinking and reflection on real-life situations (SALTO-YOUTH, 2025; SALTO-YOUTH, 2026). Group sharing (e.g., watching a queer-themed film together or reading excerpts of literature) followed by discussion further supports empathy and community-building (SALTO-YOUTH, 2025; SALTO-YOUTH, 2019). Facilitators may also select and recommend queer stories (books, podcasts, films), thereby strengthening representation—when young people recognise their own story in media, they feel acknowledged and seen (SALTO-YOUTH, 2025). Overall, queer storytelling in youth work functions as a tool for strengthening identity, self-acceptance, and civic engagement, while also developing communication, creativity, and media literacy.

6.2. The Storytelling Synthesis Model: A Holistic Approach to Wellbeing and Social Change

6.2.1 Introduction

Storytelling in non-formal education is best understood not as a single activity, but as a layered and evolving process through which participants gradually build the confidence, capacity, and agency to express themselves and engage with others. In the context of LGBTQIA+ wellbeing, this process requires particular care, as storytelling is often deeply connected to identity, visibility, and lived experiences of marginalization. For this reason, storytelling must be facilitated as a structured pedagogical journey rather than an isolated exercise.

We would like to propose a storytelling synthesis model to offer such a framework. It integrates relational, reflective, creative, and action-oriented dimensions into a coherent pathway that aligns with the principles of non-formal education. Rooted in experiential learning and participant-centered practice, the model supports individuals in moving from initial connection to meaningful expression and, ultimately, to social engagement. Storytelling, in this sense, becomes a process of becoming: a way of understanding oneself, relating to others, and positioning one's voice within a broader social context.

6.2.2 The Logic of the Model

The model follows a developmental progression in which each phase builds upon the previous one, while remaining flexible enough to respond to the needs of a particular group. The sequence reflects a fundamental pedagogical insight: participants are more able to engage meaningfully in storytelling when the group has established conditions of trust, consent, respect and protection from avoidable harm, and they cannot use storytelling as a tool for change unless they have developed both voice and awareness. While facilitators may move back and forth between phases depending on group dynamics, the underlying logic remains consistent. The process begins with the creation of trust, moves through ethical and reflective engagement, expands into creative and collective expression, and culminates in public sharing and social action.

The model consists of eight interconnected phases, supported throughout by embodiment as a cross-cutting dimension. The model follows a developmental pathway, where each phase builds on the previous one:

01	02
Safety & Trust	Ethics & Listening
03	04
Self-Reflection	Expression
05	06
Co-Creation	Narrative Skills
07	08
Sharing & Visibility	Social Context & Action

Across all eight phases, embodiment functions as a cross-cutting dimension. Movement, gesture, play, sensory awareness and physical presence can support participation, expression and reflection throughout the storytelling process rather than constituting a separate final stage.

Embodiment emphasises that storytelling is not only a cognitive process, but can also involve the expression and processing of emotions, identities and lived experiences through the body. Recognising embodiment as a cross-cutting dimension helps clarify how physical presence, movement and sensory experience can contribute to storytelling across the different phases of the model. This perspective is particularly relevant to inclusive practice, as it acknowledges that participants may experience, process and communicate their identities and experiences in different ways.

These phases are not strictly linear; facilitators may revisit or adapt them depending on group dynamics. However, the sequence reflects an important pedagogical principle: participants must feel safe before they can share and must develop voice before they can use it for change.

6.2.3 Individual Phases

1	Safety and Trust: Creating the Conditions for Storytelling At its foundation, storytelling depends on the existence of a space in which participants feel secure enough to express themselves. In LGBTQIA+ contexts, this cannot be taken for granted. Many participants enter the space with prior experiences of exclusion, misrecognition, or silence. The initial phase of the model therefore focuses on building trust and establishing a sense of belonging. Through relational and often playful activities, participants begin to recognize one another, connect on a human level, and experience the group as a supportive environment. This stage is not yet about telling full stories. Rather, it is about enabling participants to feel that they have a place within the group and that their presence matters. In storytelling terms, this phase activates the idea that every person carries a story, even if it has not yet been articulated. The wellbeing impact of this stage is significant, as it reduces anxiety and creates the emotional conditions necessary for deeper engagement.
2	Ethics and Listening: Building Responsible Story Spaces Once a basic level of trust has been established, attention shifts toward the ethical dimensions of storytelling. Participants begin to explore what it means to listen to others, to represent someone else's experience, and to hold stories with care. This phase introduces storytelling not only as an act of expression but also as a relational practice that involves responsibility. Through exercises that highlight how stories can be altered, misunderstood, or reshaped when passed between people, participants become aware of the fragility and power of narratives. The importance of consent, accuracy, and respect is foregrounded, and the group collectively establishes norms that protect both storytellers and listeners. This stage is essential in preventing harm and ensuring that storytelling remains a tool for empowerment rather than exploitation. It also strengthens the sense of collective accountability within the group, reinforcing the idea that storytelling is always embedded in relationships.
3	Self-Reflection: Making Meaning of Experience With trust and ethical awareness in place, participants are ready to engage more directly with their own experiences. Storytelling at this stage becomes a process of reflection, through which individuals begin to identify and interpret the events, emotions, and relationships that shape their lives. Rather than simply recounting what has happened, participants are encouraged to explore what those experiences mean to them. This reflective process allows participants to connect different moments across time, linking past experiences to present realities and future aspirations. It also supports the development of narrative coherence, which is closely tied to identity and wellbeing. By articulating their own perspectives, participants gain a stronger sense of self and begin to recognize their capacity to shape their own narratives. In this way, storytelling becomes a tool for both personal insight and emotional processing.
4	Expression: Expanding Ways of Telling As participants grow more comfortable with reflection, the model opens up multiple avenues for expression. Not all stories can be easily articulated through spoken or written language, particularly when they involve complex or sensitive experiences. For this reason, inclusive storytelling requires a diversity of expressive forms. Participants are encouraged to experiment with visual, symbolic, and associative modes of storytelling, such as collage, zine-making, or other creative practices. These approaches allow for fragmented, non-linear, or metaphorical narratives that may feel safer or more authentic than direct verbalization. This phase emphasizes that there is no single correct way to tell a story. By validating multiple forms of expression, it reduces barriers to participation and ensures that storytelling remains accessible to people with different abilities, languages, and comfort levels.
5	Co-Creation: Storytelling as a Collective Practice As individual confidence increases, storytelling begins to shift from a personal to a collective process. Participants engage in activities that require them to build narratives together, negotiate meaning, and share authorship. This phase challenges the notion of storytelling as an individual act and instead frames it as something that emerges through interaction and dialogue. Through co-creation, participants experience how stories can evolve when multiple perspectives are brought together. They learn to listen, adapt, and integrate different viewpoints, which fosters empathy and mutual understanding. This collective dimension is particularly important in LGBTQIA+ contexts, where community and shared experience play a central role in both identity formation and resilience. Storytelling here becomes a way of building connections and constructing shared narratives that reflect the diversity of the group.
6	Narrative Skills: Understanding How Stories Work Having engaged in both personal and collective storytelling, participants are then supported in developing a more conscious understanding of how stories are constructed. This phase introduces elements such as character development, perspective, and the relationship between choices and outcomes within a narrative. By analyzing and creating stories with intention, participants gain insight into the mechanics of storytelling. They begin to see that narratives are not neutral or fixed, but are shaped by decisions, contexts, and power dynamics. This awareness is empowering, as it allows participants to question dominant narratives and to reframe their own experiences in ways that affirm their identities. Storytelling thus becomes a tool not only for expression, but for critical thinking and narrative agency.
7	Sharing and Visibility: From Private to Public A key moment in the storytelling process occurs when stories move from private reflection into shared space. Participants are given opportunities to present their work, witness the stories of others, and engage in dialogue. This act of sharing can be both empowering and vulnerable, and it must be carefully facilitated to ensure that participants retain control over how their stories are presented. Visibility plays a crucial role in social change, particularly for communities that have historically been marginalized or silenced. When participants choose to share their stories, they contribute to a broader landscape of representation, challenging stereotypes and expanding public understanding. At the same time, facilitators must remain attentive to issues of safety and consent, recognizing that visibility is not always without risk. The emphasis remains on participant choice and agency.
8	Social Context and Action: Storytelling for Change In the final phase of the model, storytelling is explicitly connected to the wider social context. Participants are encouraged to consider how their stories relate to systems of power, cultural norms, and social inequalities. They reflect on the potential of storytelling as a tool for advocacy, awareness-raising, and community engagement. Through this process, storytelling moves beyond personal expression and becomes a means of contributing to social change. Participants begin to see themselves not only as storytellers, but as active agents capable of influencing their environments. Whether through community initiatives, creative outputs, or everyday interactions, they are invited to continue using their voice beyond the workshop space. This phase reinforces the idea that stories are both personal and political, and that sharing them can have tangible impact.

Embodiment as a Cross-Cutting Dimension

Throughout all phases of the model, storytelling is understood as an embodied practice. Movement, play, and physical expression are not merely energisers, but integral components of how stories are experienced and communicated. By engaging the body, participants deepen their connection to their own emotions and to the group, while also accessing forms of expression that go beyond language.

Embodiment enhances the inclusivity and accessibility of storytelling, making it possible for participants to engage in ways that feel natural and intuitive. It also contributes to overall wellbeing by fostering presence, reducing stress, and encouraging spontaneity. In this sense, storytelling is not only something that is told, but something that is lived and felt.

Conclusion

The Storytelling Synthesis Model frames storytelling as a comprehensive educational process that supports both individual and collective transformation. By guiding participants through stages of trust-building, ethical awareness, reflection, expression, co-creation, skill development, sharing, and social engagement, the model creates a pathway through which storytelling can contribute to wellbeing and social change.

In LGBTQIA+ youth work, this approach is particularly significant. It creates spaces where participants can explore and affirm their identities, connect with others, and develop the confidence to share their experiences. At the same time, it equips them with the tools to use storytelling as a means of challenging exclusion and promoting inclusion within their communities.

Ultimately, storytelling becomes more than a method. It becomes a practice through which individuals and groups can make sense of their experiences, claim their voices, and participate in shaping the narratives that define their lives and societies.

1

Safety & Trust → (Phase 1)

2

Ethics & Listening → (Phase 2)

3

Self-Reflection → (Phase 3)

4

Expression → (Phase 4)

5

Co-Creation → (Phase 5)

6

Skill Building → (Phase 6)

7

Sharing & Visibility →
(Phase 7)

8

Social Context → (Phase 8)

9

Embodiment → (transversal)

6.3. Example activities from the Our Story project

01	02	03
Relational & Trust-Building Story Foundations	Listening, Empathy & Ethical Story Exchange	Personal Narrative Exploration & Reflection
04	05	06
Creative & Expressive Storytelling (Non-Verbal and Hybrid)	Collective Story Creation & Co-Authorship	Narrative Construction & Critical Story Design
07	08	09
Digital, Performative & Public Storytelling	Experiential & Contextual Storytelling (Learning in Real Life)	Embodied & Play-Based Storytelling

Phase 1: Relational & Trust-Building Story Foundations

Core function

Create psychological safety and prepare participants to enter storytelling space

Activities included

- Expectations–fears–contributions (sea metaphor)
- Name + fun fact
- Name ball game
- Blanket game
- Eye contact & movement
- Silent line-up
- Deep sharing in small groups

Methodological logic

These are pre-narrative methodologies — they do not yet produce full stories but establish: trust, recognition, emotional safety, group cohesion

Storytelling principles

- Every person is a storyteller (voice activation)
- Stories require safe audiences
- Listening precedes telling

Wellbeing impact

- Reduces anxiety and isolation
- Builds belonging and group identity
- Creates conditions for authentic expression

Phase 2: Listening, Empathy & Ethical Story Exchange

Core function Develop responsibility in handling stories (own and others')	Activities included • Introduce the other • Waiting game (movement distortion) • Group contract creation	Methodological logic Focus on relational ethics and interpretation, key to inclusive storytelling.
Storytelling principles • Stories change through retelling • Narrative ownership matters • Ethical storytelling requires consent and accuracy	Wellbeing & social impact • Prevents harm (misrepresentation, appropriation) • Builds empathy and accountability • Strengthens inclusive group culture	

Phase 3: Personal Narrative Exploration & Reflection

Core function Enable participants to access, structure, and reflect on their own stories	Activities included • Guided Personal Story Reflection • Timeline Mapping • Pair Story Reflection • "One Moment" Exercise	Methodological logic Uses guided reflection frameworks to transform experience into narrative.
Storytelling principles • Meaning making is central to storytelling • Stories connect past, present, and future • Reflection turns experience into knowledge	Wellbeing impact • Strengthens self-awareness • Supports emotional processing • Builds narrative coherence (important for identity)	

Phase 4: Creative & Expressive Storytelling (Non-Verbal and Hybrid)

Core function

Expand storytelling beyond verbal language to increase inclusivity

Activities included

- Collage workshop
- Word association → sentences
- Object-based elements
- Zine creation (partly overlaps with next phase)

Methodological logic

Focus on alternative narrative forms, crucial in LGBTQIA+ and trauma-aware contexts.

Storytelling principles

- Stories can be symbolic, fragmented, and visual
- Expression does not require linear narration
- Multiple literacies = inclusive storytelling

Wellbeing impact

- Reduces pressure to verbalize trauma
- Enables expression for diverse abilities
- Encourages creativity and play

Phase 5: Collective Story Creation & Co-Authorship

Core function Build shared narratives and challenge individualistic storytelling	Activities included • Collaborative zine creation • Group zine continuation process • Thematic performance (genre-based reflection)	Methodological logic Participants co-create narratives, negotiating meaning together.
Storytelling principles • Stories are social constructs • Multiple voices enrich narratives • Authorship can be shared	Social change relevance • Mirrors community storytelling processes • Builds solidarity and collective identity • Challenges dominant single narratives	

Phase 6: Narrative Construction & Critical Story Design

Core function Develop technical storytelling skills and narrative awareness	Activities included • Character development workshop • Scenario-based character adaptation • Sliding Doors • Word association (as narrative building tool)	Methodological logic Focus on how stories are built, structured, and influenced by context.
Storytelling principles • Narratives are constructed, not neutral • Characters embody identity and perspective • Choices shape story outcomes	Wellbeing & empowerment • Builds narrative agency ("I can shape stories") • Enables critical thinking about representation • Supports re-authoring personal narratives	

Phase 7: Digital, Performative & Public Storytelling

Core function Move stories into public and performative spaces	Activities included • Video creation (group storytelling) • Story reading + author testimony • Fanzine & collage gala	Methodological logic Stories are produced, shared, and witnessed
Storytelling principles • Visibility creates impact • Storytelling is relational (needs audience) • Narratives can challenge dominant discourses	Social change impact • Amplifies marginalized voices • Builds advocacy capacity • Creates community dialogue	

Phase 8: Experiential & Contextual Storytelling (Learning in Real Life)



Phase 9: Embodied & Play-Based Storytelling

Core function Use the body and play to explore narrative dynamics	Activities included • Chair energizer game • Movement-based exercises • Genre-based performances	Methodological logic Storytelling is embodied, not just cognitive
Storytelling principles • Stories are felt, not only told • Embodiment deepens understanding • Play enables experimentation with identity	Wellbeing impact • Releases tension and stress • Encourages spontaneity and joy • Supports non-verbal expression	

Phase 1: Relational and Trust-Building Foundations

Storytelling begins with safety. Before participants can share experiences or reflect on identity, they need to feel comfortable, seen, and respected within the group. This phase focuses on building that foundation through simple, low-pressure activities that encourage connection without requiring personal disclosure. Participants gradually get to know each other, recognize one another as individuals, and start to experience the group as a shared space.

The aim is not to produce stories, but to create the conditions where storytelling becomes possible. Everyone carries a story, but not everyone is ready to tell it immediately. By introducing small moments of interaction—learning names, making eye contact, moving together—participants begin to find their place in the group. Listening plays an important role here, as trust develops not only through speaking, but through being acknowledged by others.

Many activities involve movement and non-verbal interaction, which helps participants connect in a more natural and accessible way. This is especially important for those who may feel less confident expressing themselves verbally. Participation remains voluntary throughout, allowing individuals to engage at their own pace. Respecting these boundaries is essential for building genuine trust.

As connections form, participants often feel more at ease and less isolated. A sense of belonging starts to develop, making it easier to move into deeper forms of reflection and expression. This phase is therefore not a preliminary step to move through quickly, but a necessary part of the process. Without trust, storytelling remains superficial; with it, participants are more likely to engage openly and meaningfully.

ACTIVITIES:

Name + Fun Fact Icebreaker

Aim

To introduce participants in a low-pressure way and initiate personal storytelling through small, voluntary and low-pressure self-disclosure.

Group size

Any (works best up to 25; for larger groups, divide into circles)

Time

10–15 minutes

Materials

None

Step-by-step instructions

1. Invite participants to stand or sit in a circle so everyone can see each other.
2. Briefly explain the activity: each person will say their name and share one "fun fact" about themselves. Clarify that this can be anything light and optional, such as a hobby, a preference, or something unusual.
3. Model the activity yourself first. Say your name and give a simple, non-intimidating example. This sets the tone and reduces pressure.
4. Choose a direction (clockwise or counterclockwise) and invite the first participant to begin.
5. Allow each participant to share in turn. Do not rush, but keep a gentle pace.
6. Acknowledge each contribution with simple non-verbal encouragement (eye contact, nodding). Avoid evaluative comments.
7. Once everyone has shared, briefly thank the group and highlight that this is the first step in getting to know each other.

Facilitation notes

Encourage simplicity to avoid performance pressure. If someone feels uncomfortable, remind the group that passing is always an option.

Storytelling link

This activity introduces micro-storytelling, helping participants begin to claim space and voice in a low-pressure process in which they retain control over what they disclose .

ACTIVITIES:

Name Ball Game

Aim

To support name learning, build group energy, and strengthen attention and connection between participants.

Group size

10–25 participants

Time

10–20 minutes

Materials

One soft ball (or similar object)

Step-by-step instructions

1. Ask participants to stand in a circle with enough space to move comfortably.
2. Explain that the goal is to learn each other's names through a throwing game.
3. Start by holding the ball yourself. Say the name of a participant and gently throw the ball to them.
4. The person who catches the ball says the name of another participant and throws the ball to them.
5. Continue until everyone has received the ball at least once.
6. Once the group is comfortable, introduce the next level: keep the same sequence and repeat it several times so participants memorize the pattern.
7. Gradually increase complexity by adding a second ball into the sequence.
8. If the group is confident, increase the speed or add playful variations (e.g., different throwing styles).
9. End the activity by slowing down and bringing the group back to stillness.

Facilitation notes

Ensure the pace matches the group's energy level. If mistakes happen, normalize them and keep the atmosphere playful rather than competitive.

Storytelling link

This activity strengthens recognition and relational awareness, which are essential for storytelling. Knowing and naming others is the first step in acknowledging them as storytellers.

ACTIVITIES:

Blanket Game

Aim

To reinforce name learning, build quick recognition, and create a playful sense of group cohesion.

Group size

10–20 participants

Time

15–20 minutes

Materials

A blanket, large cloth, or sheet

Step-by-step instructions

1. Divide participants into two equal groups. Ask each group to stand on opposite sides of the room.
2. Place two facilitators (or volunteers) in the middle holding the blanket vertically so it acts as a visual barrier between the two groups. Participants should not be able to see the other side.
3. Ask each group to quietly choose one person to stand close to the blanket.
4. Once both sides are ready, quickly drop the blanket.
5. The two participants facing each other must say the name of the other person as quickly as possible.
6. The person who says the correct name first "wins" the round (you can decide whether they bring the other person to their team or simply score a point).
7. Repeat the process with different participants each round.
8. Continue until most participants have had at least one turn.
9. End the activity with a short debrief or light reflection on remembering names.

Facilitation notes

Keep the tone playful and supportive. Avoid framing the activity as highly competitive. Ensure that participants who struggle with names are not put under pressure—offer encouragement instead.

Storytelling link

The game reinforces visibility and recognition, which are fundamental to storytelling. Being able to name someone is a basic act of acknowledging their presence and, symbolically, their story.

Below are step-by-step facilitation guidelines for the next three activities, maintaining a clear, practical structure while embedding non-formal education and storytelling awareness.

ACTIVITIES:

Eye Contact & Movement Exercise (0–10 Intensity)

Aim

To build presence, awareness of self and others, and introduce non-verbal, embodied communication.

Group size

10–25 participants

Time

15–20 minutes

Materials

Open space

Step-by-step instructions

1. Ask participants to spread out in the room so they have space to move without touching others.
2. Invite them to start walking slowly around the space in silence. Encourage them to be aware of their movement and the presence of others.
3. Introduce the concept of intensity on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means minimal engagement (avoiding eye contact, low energy) and 10 means high engagement (strong eye contact, expressive movement).
4. Begin with level 0. Ask participants to move while avoiding eye contact and keeping their energy low.
5. Gradually increase the level to 3 or 4. Encourage occasional eye contact and slightly more open body language.
6. Move to level 7 or 8. Participants should now make more frequent eye contact, use more expressive movement, and acknowledge others more clearly.
7. Occasionally reach level 10, where participants fully engage with eye contact, presence, and interaction (without speaking).
8. After reaching the highest level, gradually bring the group back down to 0.
9. Ask participants to stop, take a breath, and notice how they feel.
10. Facilitate a short reflection: What changed between levels? When did you feel most comfortable or uncomfortable?

Facilitation notes

Be attentive to participants who may feel uncomfortable with eye contact. Emphasize that they can regulate their own level of engagement. Keep transitions gradual and clearly guided.

Storytelling link

This activity develops embodied storytelling awareness, highlighting that stories are communicated not only through words but through presence, gaze, and body language.

ACTIVITIES:

Silent Line-Up

Aim

To encourage non-verbal communication, collaboration, and awareness of different forms of expression.

Group size

10–25 participants

Time

10–15 minutes

Materials

None

Step-by-step instructions

1. Ask participants to stand in a random line or phase.
2. Explain that they must arrange themselves in a specific order without speaking.
3. Give a clear instruction for the order, such as by birthday (day and month), height, or distance traveled to the training.
4. Emphasize that no verbal communication is allowed, but gestures and movement are permitted.
5. Allow participants time to organize themselves. Observe without intervening.
6. Once the group believes they are in order, ask them to confirm by speaking their answers one by one.
7. If the order is incorrect, invite them to try again or briefly reflect on what made it challenging.
8. Repeat with a different criterion if time allows.

Facilitation notes

Choose criteria that are inclusive and not overly personal. Ensure participants understand that there is no single "right" way to communicate non-verbally.

Storytelling link

This activity highlights non-verbal and implicit storytelling, showing how meaning, identity, and information can be communicated without words.

ACTIVITIES:

Deep Sharing in Small Groups

Aim

To create safer conditions for voluntary personal storytelling, active listening, and trust-building.

Group size

Any (divide into groups of 3–5 participants)

Time

30–45 minutes

Materials

Optional: guiding questions

Step-by-step instructions

1. Divide participants into small groups of three to five people. Ensure the groups feel balanced and comfortable.
2. Introduce the purpose of the activity: to share more personal reflections in a smaller, safer setting.
3. Establish clear guidelines: confidentiality, respectful listening, no interruption, and the right to pass.
4. Provide a prompt. For example: "Share a moment when you felt accepted or not accepted," or "Share an experience that shaped who you are today."
5. Explain the structure. Each person will have a set amount of time to share (e.g., 3–5 minutes), while others listen without interrupting.
6. Begin the first round. Encourage time awareness but avoid strict enforcement that creates pressure.
7. After everyone has shared, invite a second round of open reflection within the small group (participants can respond, share connections, or reflect on what they heard).
8. Bring everyone back to the large group. Offer a gentle debrief, focusing on the experience rather than the content of stories.
9. Close the activity with a grounding moment or short pause.

Facilitation notes

Monitor the emotional atmosphere. Be available if someone needs support. Avoid asking participants to share details publicly afterward. Emphasize voluntary participation throughout.

Storytelling link

This activity is central to authentic storytelling, fostering narrative voice, deep listening, and the co-creation of meaning within a respectful and accountable relational space.

Phase 2: Listening, Empathy and Ethical Story Exchange

Once a basic level of trust is established, the focus shifts to how stories are shared and received. Storytelling at this stage is not only about speaking, but about listening and understanding the responsibility that comes with it. Participants begin to explore what it means to hear someone else's story and how their reactions and interpretations can shape it.

A key learning here is that stories are not fixed. As they are told and retold, they can change—details may be lost, meanings added, or intentions shifted. Through simple activities, participants experience this directly and begin to see that engaging with someone else's story requires care.

Listening becomes a central practice. Participants are encouraged to listen without interrupting or judging, and to focus on understanding rather than responding. This creates space for more honest sharing and gradually builds empathy within the group.

At the same time, participants reflect on how to speak about others. When they try to retell someone else's story, they often notice how easily meaning can shift. This leads to an important understanding: each person has ownership of their story and the right to decide what is shared and how. This is especially relevant in LGBTQIA+ contexts, where stories are often simplified or misrepresented.

To support this, the group establishes shared agreements around respect, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Creating these together helps participants take responsibility for the space and for each other.

As the phase develops, interactions become more attentive and respectful. Participants begin to notice both differences and connections in experiences, which strengthens inclusion. Clear boundaries and careful listening make the space safer and support deeper engagement.

This phase highlights a simple idea: stories matter, and how we handle them matters. By the end, participants are better prepared not only to share their own stories, but also to listen to and hold the stories of others with care.

ACTIVITIES:

Introduce the Other

Aim

To develop active listening skills and raise awareness of how we represent other people's stories.

Group size

10–25 participants

Time

20–30 minutes

Materials

None

Step-by-step instructions

1. Ask participants to form pairs. If needed, support the process to ensure everyone has a partner.
2. Explain that each pair will have a short conversation where they get to know each other.
3. Give a clear time frame, for example 5–7 minutes per person. During this time, one person speaks while the other listens. Then they switch roles.
4. Provide simple guiding prompts, such as: who they are, something important to them, or a meaningful experience they would like to share.
5. Remind participants to listen carefully and not interrupt while the other person is speaking.
6. After both have shared, bring the group back together.
7. Explain the second step: each participant will now introduce their partner to the group.
8. Invite participants, one by one, to present their partner.
9. After all introductions, facilitate a short reflection. Ask questions such as: how did it feel to be introduced by someone else? What was easy or difficult about introducing your partner?
10. Close by highlighting the importance of listening and accuracy when sharing someone else's story.

Facilitation notes

Remind participants that they do not have to share anything too personal. Pay attention to how participants describe each other and gently guide the reflection toward respect and responsibility.

Storytelling link

This activity shows how stories change when told by others and introduces the idea of narrative ownership and ethical representation.

ACTIVITIES:

Waiting Game (Movement Distortion)

Aim

To demonstrate how messages and stories change as they pass from one person to another.

Group size

10–20 participants

Time

15–20 minutes

Materials

None

Step-by-step instructions

1. Ask participants to stand in a line, one behind the other, all facing the same direction.
2. Explain that this will be a silent activity. No speaking is allowed.
3. Invite the last person in the line to turn around so they can see you. Show them a simple movement or short sequence (for example: a gesture with arms and a step).
4. Once they have seen the movement, they tap the person in front of them on the shoulder.
5. The next person turns around, and the movement is shown to them.
6. This continues until the movement reaches the first person in the line.
7. The final person performs the movement they received for the whole group.
8. Then, demonstrate the original movement again so everyone can compare.
9. Facilitate a short reflection. Ask: What changed? Where did the differences appear? What does this remind you of in real-life communication?

Facilitation notes

Keep the movement simple but clear. Avoid making it too complex, as the focus is on observing change, not testing memory.

Storytelling link

This activity clearly illustrates how stories can be altered, simplified, or distorted, reinforcing the importance of careful listening and responsible retelling.

ACTIVITIES:

Group Contract Creation

Aim

To co-create shared agreements that contribute to a safer, respectful and accountable storytelling space.

Group size

Any

Time

20–30 minutes

Materials

Flipchart or board, markers

Step-by-step instructions

1. Gather participants in a circle or semi-circle where everyone can see the board.
2. Introduce the purpose of the activity: to create a shared agreement that will guide how the group works together.
3. Ask an open question to start the discussion, such as: What do you need in order to feel safe and comfortable in this space?
4. Invite participants to share their ideas. Write each contribution on the board using their own words as much as possible.
5. If needed, support the discussion by suggesting key areas, such as: listening, confidentiality, respect, speaking time, and the right to pass.
6. Once a list is created, go through each point with the group and check that everyone understands and agrees.
7. Ask if anything is missing or needs to be adjusted.
8. When the group is satisfied, confirm the agreement as a shared commitment.
9. Optionally, ask participants to visibly agree (for example, by raising hands or a simple gesture).
10. Keep the contract visible in the room and refer back to it when needed during the training.

Facilitation notes

Ensure that all voices can be heard, not only the most vocal participants. Keep the language simple and practical. Avoid making the contract too long or abstract.

Storytelling link

This activity establishes the ethical foundation of storytelling, ensuring that sharing happens within a framework of consent, respect, and mutual responsibility.

Phase 3: Personal Narrative Exploration and Reflection

This stage focuses on helping participants make sense of their own experiences. The aim is not simply to describe what happened, but to identify what feels important, what stands out, and what meaning a person gives to it.

At this point in the process, participants need activities that slow things down and create space for reflection. Instead of broad discussion or quick feedback, they are invited to focus on specific moments, personal turning points, and the connections between events and emotions. This helps them move from raw experience to personal narrative.

The activities in this phase support this by giving participants simple structures for reflection. They may focus on one moment, map experiences over time, or tell a short story to a partner and notice what becomes clearer in the telling. The emphasis is on personal perspective. Participants are encouraged to notice not only what happened, but why it matters to them now.

This stage is important for wellbeing because reflection can bring clarity and reduce the feeling of being overwhelmed by experience. It helps participants organize thoughts, name emotions, and see their experiences in a more coherent way. This can strengthen self-understanding and make later storytelling feel more grounded.

From a storytelling perspective, this phase introduces an important shift: stories are shaped through reflection. Meaning does not always appear immediately. It often becomes clearer when participants revisit an experience, look at it from a distance, and find the words or images that fit it.

By the end of this phase, participants have a clearer sense of their own stories and are better prepared to express them in creative, collective, or public forms.

ACTIVITIES:

Guided Personal Story Reflection

Aim

To help participants reflect on one personal experience and begin turning it into a story with meaning.

Group size

Any

Time

30–45 minutes

Materials

Paper and pens

Step-by-step instructions

1. Invite participants to sit comfortably and explain that the activity focuses on one personal moment that stayed with them.
2. Introduce a simple prompt, such as: "Think of one moment from this week that affected you."
3. Give participants one or two quiet minutes to think before writing.
4. Ask them to write freely for 10–15 minutes. Guide them with simple questions: What happened? Who was there? How did you feel? Why does this moment matter to you?
5. Remind participants that they do not need to write a perfect text. The aim is reflection, not good writing.
6. After writing, invite participants to read what they wrote silently to themselves and underline one sentence that feels important.
7. Ask participants to share in pairs or small groups, only if they want to. They can share the full reflection or just the sentence they underlined.
8. Bring the group back together and close with a short reflection on how it felt to focus on one moment in this way.

Facilitation notes

Keep the room quiet during the writing phase. Make it clear that sharing is optional. Some participants may prefer to keep the writing private.

Storytelling link

This activity helps participants move from experience to personal narrative, with attention to both events and meaning.

ACTIVITIES:

Timeline Mapping

Aim

To help participants connect different experiences and identify important moments or turning points.

Group size

Any

Time

30–45 minutes

Materials

Paper, pens, markers

Step-by-step instructions

1. Give each participant a sheet of paper and ask them to draw a simple horizontal line across it.
2. Explain that this line represents a period of time. Depending on the context, it could be the training week, the last year, or another relevant period.
3. Ask participants to mark 4–6 important moments on the line. These can be events, changes, or experiences that stand out.
4. For each moment, invite them to add a few words about what happened and how they felt.
5. Give participants time to complete their timeline individually.
6. Once finished, ask them to look at the full line and notice any patterns. For example: Were there any turning points? Did something change over time? Which moment feels most important now?
7. Invite participants to share their timeline in pairs or small groups.
8. Close with a short group reflection on what it was like to see experiences laid out as a sequence.

Facilitation notes

Participants do not need to include everything. Encourage them to choose only what feels relevant. The timeline can be simple.

Storytelling link

This activity helps participants see that stories develop over time and that meaning often becomes clearer when experiences are placed in sequence.

ACTIVITIES:

Pair Story Reflection

Aim

To support personal reflection through speaking and listening with one other person.

Group size

Any

Time

25–35 minutes

Materials

None

Step-by-step instructions

1. Divide participants into pairs.
2. Explain that each person will tell a short personal story about one experience or moment, while the other listens without interrupting.
3. Give a clear prompt, such as: "Tell a story about one moment that changed something for you."
4. Give the first speaker 4–5 minutes to share. The listener should only listen.
5. After the first sharing, give the listener one or two minutes to reflect back what they heard. They should focus on what stood out, not on advice or interpretation.
6. Switch roles and repeat.
7. Once both participants have shared, ask each pair to discuss briefly: What did you notice about your own story when you heard yourself say it out loud?
8. Bring the group back together and close with a short reflection.

Facilitation notes

Explain clearly that the listener is not there to solve, fix, or analyse. Their role is to listen and reflect back carefully.

Storytelling link

This activity helps participants hear their own story more clearly and notice how telling it aloud can change their understanding of it.

ACTIVITIES:

'One Moment' Exercise

Aim

To help participants slow down and explore one specific moment in detail.

Group size

Any

Time

30–40 minutes

Materials

Paper and pens

Step-by-step instructions

1. Explain that participants will focus on one small moment rather than a whole story.
2. Give a simple prompt, such as: "Choose one moment you remember clearly."
3. Ask participants to spend a minute choosing the moment before they begin writing.
4. Guide them through the reflection step by step. Ask them to write about: Where were you? What could you see? What was happening? What were you feeling at that moment?
5. After a first round of description, ask them to add a second layer: Why does this moment stay with you? What does it tell you now?
6. Give participants time to write quietly.
7. Invite participants to share in pairs or trios, if they want to.
8. Close by asking what changed when they focused on one moment instead of a whole experience.

Facilitation notes

This works best when participants are encouraged to stay concrete and specific. If they start speaking in general terms, gently bring them back to the moment itself.

Storytelling link

This activity helps participants understand that strong stories often begin with one clear, specific moment.

Phase 4: Creative and Expressive Storytelling

At this stage, participants move from reflection into expression. The focus is on exploring different ways of telling stories, especially beyond spoken or written language. This is important because not all experiences are easy to express directly, and not all participants feel comfortable using the same forms of communication.

The activities in this phase introduce creative approaches such as visual, symbolic, and associative storytelling. These methods allow participants to express ideas, emotions, and experiences in ways that are less structured and often more accessible. Stories can be fragmented, indirect, or metaphorical, and do not need to follow a clear or linear format.

This phase supports inclusion by offering multiple entry points. Participants can choose how they want to express themselves, which reduces pressure and allows for different levels of engagement. It is particularly useful in groups where language, confidence, or personal boundaries may limit direct storytelling.

From a storytelling perspective, this phase reinforces that there is no single correct way to tell a story. It expands the understanding of storytelling as a flexible process that can take many forms.

In terms of wellbeing, creative expression provides a safer way to explore personal themes. It allows participants to engage with their experiences at their own pace and distance, while still being part of the group process.

By the end of this phase, participants are more comfortable expressing themselves and are better prepared to develop and share their stories in different formats.

ACTIVITIES:

Collage Workshop

Aim

To support visual and symbolic storytelling through images, textures, and words.

Group size

Any

Time

45–60 minutes

Materials

Magazines, newspapers, printed images, scissors, glue, paper, markers

Step-by-step instructions

1. Prepare materials in advance and arrange them so participants can easily access them.
2. Introduce the activity as a way of telling a story without relying only on words.
3. Offer a simple prompt, such as: "Create a collage that represents something about you," or "Show a feeling, experience, or idea."
4. Emphasize that there is no right or wrong way to do this.
5. Give participants time to explore materials and create their collages. Avoid interrupting the process.
6. Once finished, invite participants to share their work in pairs or small groups. Sharing can be optional.
7. Encourage participants to explain their collage if they wish, but do not require interpretation.
8. Close with a short reflection on how it felt to express something visually.

Facilitation notes

Some participants may prefer not to explain their work. Respect this. Focus on the process rather than the final product.

Storytelling link

This activity supports non-verbal and symbolic storytelling, allowing participants to express complex or sensitive experiences in a flexible way.

ACTIVITIES:

Expectations – Fears – Contributions (Sea Metaphor)

Aim

To help participants reflect on their starting point, name their needs, and position themselves within the group process.

Group size

Any

Time

20–30 minutes

Materials

Flipchart or large paper, markers, sticky notes (optional)

Step-by-step instructions

1. Draw a simple sea metaphor on a flipchart. Include elements such as a boat (journey), waves (fears), wind (expectations), and anchors or resources (contributions).
2. Explain each element in simple terms. For example, expectations are what participants hope to gain, fears are concerns or uncertainties, and contributions are what they bring to the group.
3. Give participants time to reflect individually. They can write their ideas on sticky notes or directly share aloud.
4. Invite participants to place or share their reflections on the flipchart in the corresponding areas.
5. Once all inputs are collected, briefly go through them with the group.
6. Highlight common themes without analysing too deeply.
7. Acknowledge both positive expectations and concerns as valid.
8. Close by connecting this to the group journey ahead.

Facilitation notes

Keep the tone open and non-judgmental. Do not force participants to share fears publicly if they are uncomfortable.

Storytelling link

This activity supports starting a personal narrative, helping participants identify where they are at the beginning of the process.

ACTIVITIES:

Object-Based Storytelling

Aim

To use objects as a starting point for storytelling and reduce pressure on direct self-disclosure.

Group size

Any

Time

20–30 minutes

Materials

Personal objects (brought by participants) or random objects provided by facilitator

Step-by-step instructions

1. Ask participants to bring an object with them, or provide a selection of objects.
2. Introduce the activity: each object can represent a story, memory, or idea.
3. Give participants a few minutes to think about how their object connects to a story.
4. Invite participants to share in pairs or small groups.
5. Encourage them to explain the meaning of the object, if they wish.
6. Allow time for listening and optional follow-up questions.
7. Bring the group back together and close with a brief reflection.

Facilitation notes

Participants can choose how personal they want to be. Objects can be symbolic rather than literal.

Storytelling link

This activity supports indirect storytelling, allowing participants to create distance while still expressing meaningful narratives.

ACTIVITIES:

Zine Creation (Collaborative)

Aim

To explore creative, low-threshold storytelling and introduce shared authorship.

Group size

Any

Time

45–90 minutes

Materials

Paper, markers, magazines, scissors, glue

Step-by-step instructions

1. Introduce the concept of a zine as a simple, handmade publication that combines text and visuals.
2. Explain that participants will create pages individually or collectively.
3. Offer a theme if helpful (for example: identity, belonging, or community).
4. Give participants time to create their pages using any format they choose.
5. Once pages are ready, collect and assemble them into one or more zines.
6. Share the final result with the group. Participants can browse or read together.
7. Occasionally, invite short reflections on the process.
8. Keep the zine as a group output or decide together what to do with it.

Facilitation notes

This activity overlaps with the next phase, as it can also move into sharing and visibility. At this stage, keep the focus on creation rather than publication.

Storytelling link

Zine-making introduces creative and collective storytelling, allowing multiple voices to exist side by side without needing to be unified into one narrative.

Phase 5: Collective Story Creation and Co-Authorship

This stage shifts storytelling from individual expression to shared creation. Participants work together to build stories, combining different perspectives, ideas, and experiences.

The focus is on process rather than outcome. Participants learn to listen, adapt, and negotiate meaning. Stories are no longer owned by one person but shaped by the group.

This challenges the idea of a single, fixed narrative. Instead, multiple voices exist alongside each other, sometimes complementing, sometimes contradicting. This reflects real social dynamics, especially in diverse groups.

From a storytelling perspective, this stage highlights that stories are constructed through interaction. Meaning emerges through collaboration, not only individual intention.

For well-being, this process strengthens connection and belonging. Participants experience being part of something shared, which can reduce isolation and build trust.

This phase prepares participants for public storytelling by developing confidence in working with others and handling different perspectives.

ACTIVITIES:

Collaborative Zine Creation (Rotating Pages)

Aim

To experience shared authorship and build a story collectively.

Group size

4–20 participants

Time

45–60 minutes

Materials

Paper (folded into zines), pens, markers

Step-by-step instructions

1. Give each participant a folded paper (simple zine format).
2. Ask everyone to write a sentence on the first page.
3. After 1–2 minutes, ask participants to pass their zine to the person on their right.
4. The next person adds a drawing.
5. Pass again. The next person adds a sentence.
6. Continue alternating between writing and drawing until all pages are filled and the zine returns to its original creator.
7. Give participants time to look through their completed zine.
8. Invite small group sharing or brief reflections.
9. Close by asking how it felt to have others contribute to their story.

Facilitation notes

Keep the pace steady and avoid overthinking. Emphasize that participants should build on what is already there, not erase or correct it.

Storytelling link

This activity demonstrates co-authorship and loss of full control, showing how stories evolve through multiple voices.

How to Fold a One-Page Zine (8 Pages)

Materials

1 sheet of A4 (or Letter) paper
Scissors

Facilitation tips

- Demonstrate slowly while participants follow along
- Walk around and support participants who get stuck
- Prepare a sample in advance so they can see the final result
- Don't worry about perfection—small mistakes are part of the process

Step-by-step instructions

1. Take one sheet of paper and place it in front of you in landscape (horizontal) position.
2. Fold the paper in half from left to right. Press the fold firmly, then open it again.
3. Now fold the paper in half from top to bottom. Press the fold, then open it again.
4. Fold the paper once more from top to bottom so you have a long, narrow strip.
5. Keep the paper folded in this strip and take your scissors. Cut a slit along the middle fold, but only between the two center sections (about halfway across the paper).
6. Open the paper back into its original flat shape. You should see a small cut in the center.
7. Fold the paper again into the long strip (step 4).
8. Hold the ends of the strip and gently push them toward each other. The cut in the middle will open into a diamond shape.
9. Continue pushing until the paper folds into a small booklet.
10. Flatten the pages and arrange them into a booklet shape.
11. You now have an 8-page mini zine, including front cover, back cover and 6 inside pages.

ACTIVITIES:

Group Story Building

Aim

To create a shared narrative through collaboration and negotiation.

Group size

4–6 participants per group

Time

30–45 minutes

Materials

Paper and pens (optional)

Step-by-step instructions

1. Divide participants into small groups.
2. Give a simple starting point, such as a character, place, or situation.
3. Ask each group to create a story together.
4. Encourage them to include input from all members.
5. Allow time for discussion and development.
6. Ask each group to present their story to the others (spoken, acted, or read).
7. After each presentation, allow brief reactions or comments.
8. Close with a short reflection on the group process.

Facilitation notes

Observe group dynamics and support quieter participants if needed. Keep the focus on collaboration, not performance quality.

Storytelling link

This activity highlights collective meaning-making and how stories are shaped through interaction.

ACTIVITIES:

Thematic Performance (Genre-Based Reflection)

Aim

To reflect on shared experiences through creative group storytelling.

Group size

4–6 participants per group

Time

45–60 minutes

Materials

Optional props

Step-by-step instructions

1. Divide participants into small groups.
2. Assign each group a theme or genre (e.g., comedy, horror, documentary).
3. Ask each group to create a short performance based on a shared experience (e.g., the training, a topic, or a day).
4. Give time for planning and rehearsal.
5. Invite each group to perform.
6. After each performance, allow short feedback or reactions.
7. Close with a reflection on how different perspectives shaped the stories.

Facilitation notes

Keep performances short and low-pressure.
Emphasize creativity over accuracy.

Storytelling link

This activity shows how the same experience can be interpreted in different ways, depending on perspective and style.

ACTIVITIES:

Collective Story Weaving (Optional)

Aim To create a spontaneous shared story.	Group size Any	Time 10–15 minutes
Materials None		

Step-by-step instructions

1. Ask participants to sit or stand in a circle.
2. Start a story with one sentence.
3. Move around the circle, with each person adding one sentence.
4. Continue until the story reaches a natural ending or full circle.
5. Optionally repeat with a different theme.
6. Close with a brief reflection.

Facilitation notes

Encourage participants to build on previous contributions rather than changing direction completely.

Storytelling link

This activity demonstrates real-time co-creation and shared narrative flow.

Phase 6: Narrative Skills and Story Construction

This stage focuses on understanding how stories are built. Participants move from expression to consciously shaping narratives.

They explore elements such as character, perspective, and how choices influence outcomes. Through scenarios and adaptations, they see that stories are not fixed but constructed.

This helps participants recognize how narratives reflect context, assumptions, and power. It also allows them to question dominant stories and experiment with alternatives.

From a practical perspective, participants gain tools to structure stories more clearly and intentionally.

For wellbeing, this stage supports a sense of control. Participants can reframe experiences and imagine different possibilities, which strengthens agency.

By the end of this phase, participants are able not only to tell stories, but to shape them with purpose.

ACTIVITIES:

Character Development Workshop

Aim

To help participants build characters and understand perspective in storytelling.

Group size

Any

Time

45–60 minutes

Materials

Paper, pens

Step-by-step instructions

1. Introduce the idea of a character. Explain that characters have background, personality, and motivations.
2. Ask participants to create a character. They can decide basic elements such as name, age, background, and key traits.
3. Give participants time to develop their character individually or in pairs.
4. Invite participants to briefly present their character to a small group.
5. Encourage others to ask simple questions to deepen the character (e.g., what do they want, what challenges do they face).
6. Close with a short reflection on how different characters reflect different perspectives.

Facilitation notes

Keep it simple. Avoid overloading with theory.
Focus on imagination and clarity.

Storytelling link

This activity builds understanding of perspective and identity in storytelling.

ACTIVITIES:

Scenario-Based Character Adaptation

Aim

To explore how characters respond to different situations and how stories develop.

Group size

3–5 participants per group

Time

45–60 minutes

Materials

Prepared short scenarios (written or verbal)

Step-by-step instructions

1. Divide participants into small groups.
2. Ask each group to use the characters they created earlier (or create new ones if needed).
3. Give each group one or two scenarios (e.g., a conflict, a decision, a challenge).
4. Ask groups to discuss how their character would react in that situation.
5. Encourage them to think about choices and consequences.
6. Ask groups to present their scenario and outcome (spoken or acted).
7. After each presentation, allow brief reflection or questions.
8. Close with a short discussion on how different choices changed the story.

Facilitation notes

Keep scenarios clear and not too complex.
Focus on decision-making rather than performance.

Storytelling link

This activity shows how stories develop through choices and actions.

ACTIVITIES:

Sliding Doors (Alternative Storylines)

Aim

To explore multiple possible outcomes from the same starting point.

Group size

4–6 participants per group

Time

60–75 minutes

Materials

Paper, pens (optional)

Step-by-step instructions

1. Divide participants into small groups.
2. Ask each participant to create a character.
3. In groups, ask participants to connect their characters into one shared story (how they meet, what situation they are in).
4. Once the base story is created, give each group two different scenarios: one positive and one negative.
5. Ask groups to develop two short versions of the story based on these scenarios.
6. Give time for preparation.
7. Invite groups to present both versions (spoken, acted, or filmed if possible).
8. After presentations, facilitate a short reflection: what changed between the two versions?
9. Close by linking this to real-life choices and context.

Facilitation notes

Support groups to stay focused and keep stories short. Emphasize comparison between versions.

Storytelling link

This activity demonstrates that stories are not fixed and can have multiple possible outcomes.

ACTIVITIES:

Story Analysis

Aim

To understand how stories are structured and how meaning is created.

Group size

Small groups

Time

30–45 minutes

Materials

A short story, text, or example (optional)

Step-by-step instructions

1. Provide a short story or ask participants to recall a known story.
2. Ask participants to identify key elements: who is the character, what is the conflict, what happens, how it ends.
3. Let participants discuss in small groups.
4. Ask groups to share their observations.
5. Highlight differences in interpretation.
6. Close by connecting structure to storytelling practice.

Facilitation notes

Keep analysis simple and practical. Avoid academic language.

Storytelling link

This activity builds awareness of how stories are structured and interpreted.

Phase 7: Sharing and Visibility

This stage focuses on bringing stories into a shared space. Participants move from creating stories to presenting them to others.

The main aim is to create opportunities for stories to be seen and heard, while keeping control with the participants. Sharing is always optional and based on consent.

Participants experience what it means to have their story witnessed. They also practice giving and receiving feedback in a respectful way.

This stage highlights that storytelling has impact when it reaches others. It can challenge assumptions, increase understanding, and make different experiences visible.

At the same time, attention is given to safety. Not all stories need to be public, and participants decide how and what they share.

By the end of this phase, participants understand how storytelling can move from personal expression to communication with an audience.

Below are step-by-step facilitation instructions for key activities in Phase 7, focusing on sharing, witnessing, and visibility.

ACTIVITIES:

Story Sharing Circle

Aim

To create a safe and supportive conditions in which participants may choose to share their stories and be heard.

Group size

Any

Time

30–60 minutes

Materials

Optional: talking object

Step-by-step instructions

1. Invite participants to sit in a circle.
2. Explain the purpose: to share stories or outputs created during the workshop. Emphasize that sharing is voluntary.
3. Set simple guidelines: listen without interrupting, no judgement, respect confidentiality.
4. Introduce a talking object if helpful. Only the person holding it speaks.
5. Invite participants, one by one, to share their story or creative work.
6. After each sharing, allow a short pause. Avoid immediate reactions.
7. Optionally invite brief, respectful responses (e.g., what stayed with you).
8. Continue until all who want to share have done so.
9. Close by thanking participants and acknowledging the group.

Facilitation notes

Do not pressure anyone to share. Keep responses short and supportive, not analytical.

Storytelling link

This activity reinforces storytelling as a relational act, where stories gain meaning through being witnessed.

ACTIVITIES:

Fanzine / Collage Presentation

Aim

To present creative work and practice sharing stories in a group setting.

Group size

Any

Time

30–60 minutes

Materials

Participants' zines, collages

Step-by-step instructions

1. Arrange the space so participants can see each other's work (circle or gallery style).
2. Explain that participants can present their work if they wish.
3. Invite participants to take turns presenting their zine or collage.
4. Ask them to briefly explain the idea or meaning behind it, if they want.
5. After each presentation, allow a moment for simple reactions or appreciation.
6. Continue until all who want to present have shared.
7. Optionally leave time for informal viewing or discussion.
8. Close with a short reflection on the experience.

Facilitation notes

Keep the focus on sharing, not evaluation.
Avoid critical feedback unless explicitly requested.

Storytelling link

This activity supports visibility and representation, allowing participants to present their narratives in their chosen form.

ACTIVITIES:

Video / Performance Screening

Aim

To share group-created stories in a performative or visual format.

Group size

Any

Time

45–75 minutes

Materials

Screen or space for performance

Step-by-step instructions

1. Prepare the space for viewing or performance.
2. Explain that each group will present their video or performance.
3. Invite the first group to present.
4. After each presentation, allow brief reactions from the audience.
5. Encourage responses that focus on what participants noticed or felt.
6. Repeat until all groups have presented.
7. Facilitate a short group reflection: what themes came up, what stood out.
8. Close by acknowledging all contributions.

Facilitation notes

Keep feedback simple and respectful. Avoid turning it into critique.

Storytelling link

This activity connects storytelling to audience engagement and impact.

ACTIVITIES:

Gallery Walk

Aim

To create a low-pressure way of sharing and engaging with others' work.

Group size

Any

Time

20–30 minutes

Materials

Participants' outputs displayed around the room

Step-by-step instructions

1. Place participants' work around the room.
2. Invite participants to walk around freely and observe.
3. Encourage them to take time with each piece.
4. Optionally provide sticky notes for short comments or reflections.
5. Allow time for quiet viewing.
6. Bring the group back together.
7. Invite a few participants to share what they noticed.
8. Close the activity.

Facilitation notes

Keep the atmosphere calm. This works well for participants who prefer not to present publicly.

Storytelling link

This activity supports accessible sharing, allowing stories to be seen without direct performance.

Phase 8: Social Context and Action

This stage connects storytelling to the wider world. Participants move beyond personal and group experiences and begin to look at how stories relate to social realities.

The focus is on understanding that stories exist within systems such as culture, politics, and power. Participants reflect on whose stories are visible, whose are missing, and why. They also consider how storytelling can influence attitudes, create awareness, and support change.

Activities in this phase often include real-life experiences, discussions, or engagement with communities. The aim is to connect personal narratives to broader issues and contexts.

This stage also encourages participants to think about action. They reflect on how they can use storytelling in their own environments, whether through small local initiatives or ongoing projects.

From a storytelling perspective, this phase reinforces that stories are not only personal, but also social and political. They can shape how people understand the world.

By the end of this phase, participants see storytelling as a tool they can use beyond the workshop, with potential to contribute to inclusion and change.

ACTIVITIES:

Experiential Activity (e.g. Community Event / Pride Participation)

Aim

To connect personal storytelling with real-world social contexts.

Group size

Any

Time

Half-day to full-day

Materials

None (depends on activity)

Step-by-step instructions

1. Brief participants before the activity. Explain the purpose: to observe and experience storytelling in a real social context.
2. Provide guiding questions, such as: What stories do you see represented? Whose voices are visible? What messages are being shared?
3. Attend the event together (e.g. Pride march, community gathering).
4. Encourage participants to observe, engage, and take mental or written notes.
5. After the activity, gather the group in a circle.
6. Facilitate a reflection discussion based on the guiding questions.
7. Allow space for different perspectives and experiences.
8. Close by linking observations to storytelling and visibility.

Facilitation notes

Assess foreseeable risks in advance, agree on communication and meeting procedures, and ensure that participants know where and from whom they can obtain support.

Storytelling link

This activity shows how stories exist in public space and shape social narratives.

ACTIVITIES:

Guided Reflection on Social Context

Aim

To help participants connect their experiences to broader social issues.

Group size

Any

Time

30–45 minutes

Materials

Flipchart (optional)

Step-by-step instructions

1. Gather participants in a circle.
2. Introduce the focus: reflecting on the social meaning of what they experienced.
3. Ask open questions, such as: What did this event represent? Who was included and who was missing? What messages were strong or unclear?
4. Allow participants to share their thoughts one by one.
5. Note key themes if helpful.
6. Encourage participants to build on each other's ideas.
7. Keep the discussion focused and respectful.
8. Close by summarising main points.

Facilitation notes

Avoid leading participants to specific conclusions. Let insights emerge from the group.

Storytelling link

This activity supports understanding of stories as part of systems and power structures.

ACTIVITIES:

"What Can We Do?" Action Discussion

Aim

To translate reflection into possible actions.

Group size

Any

Time

30–45 minutes

Materials

Paper and pens (optional)

Step-by-step instructions

1. Introduce the activity as a next step: moving from reflection to action.
2. Ask participants to think about what they can do in their own context.
3. Provide guiding questions, such as: how can you use storytelling in your community? what small action could you take?
4. Give time for individual reflection.
5. Invite participants to share ideas in pairs or small groups.
6. Optionally collect ideas in the larger group.
7. Keep contributions practical and realistic.
8. Close by encouraging participants to take one concrete step.

Facilitation notes

Keep the focus on achievable actions. Avoid making the discussion too abstract.

Storytelling link

This activity connects storytelling to agency and social change.

ACTIVITIES:

Stakeholder Mapping (Optional)

Aim

To identify who can be involved in or influenced by storytelling work.

Group size

Small groups

Time

30–45 minutes

Materials

Paper, markers

Step-by-step instructions

1. Divide participants into small groups.
2. Ask each group to choose a topic or issue.
3. Invite them to list people, groups, or institutions connected to this issue.
4. Ask them to map relationships (who influences whom, who is affected).
5. Encourage them to think about where storytelling could have impact.
6. Ask groups to briefly present their map.
7. Facilitate a short reflection on similarities and differences.
8. Close by linking this to planning future actions.

Facilitation notes

Keep instructions simple. Focus on clarity rather than detailed analysis.

Storytelling link

This activity shows how storytelling can be used strategically to reach different audiences.

Phase 8: Exploring Stories in Real-World Contexts

Here are 8 shorter "how it works" activities designed to help participants apply their understanding of storytelling in diverse social settings, focusing on visibility, power, and community impact.

Community Story Walk

To explore how stories exist in public space and everyday environments.

How it works: Participants walk through a neighborhood (city center, local area, or specific district) and observe: symbols, posters, graffiti / businesses, institutions, public messages / who is visible and who is not

- What stories are present here?
- Whose identities are represented?

Storytelling link: Shows how public space tells stories about belonging, power, and visibility.

Visiting an LGBTQIA+ Organization

To connect personal storytelling with community-based work.

How it works: Participants visit a local NGO, community center, or initiative. They learn about: the organization's work / stories from the community / challenges and successes

- What stories are being shared?
- What stories are missing?

Storytelling link: Highlights storytelling as advocacy and community building.

Exhibition / Art Gallery Visit

To explore storytelling through art and representation.

How it works: Participants visit an exhibition (queer art, photography, or social themes). They observe how stories are expressed visually.

- What emotions or messages are communicated?
- How are identities represented?

Storytelling link: Shows how art functions as storytelling and creates visibility.

Public Campaign Analysis

To critically engage with storytelling used in campaigns.

How it works: Participants analyze posters, social media campaigns, or videos (online or in public).

- What story is being told?
- Who is the target audience?
- What impact might it have?

Storytelling link: Builds understanding of storytelling as a tool for influence and persuasion.

Street Interviews (Optional, with consent)

To engage directly with different perspectives.

How it works: Participants (in pairs) ask simple, respectful questions to people in public spaces (only if safe and appropriate).

- What different perspectives exist?
- How comfortable did you feel asking/listening?

Storytelling link: Explores real-life storytelling and dialogue, but requires strong ethical framing.

Personal Story Mapping in the City

To connect personal experiences to physical places.

How it works: Participants mark places in the city that relate to: safety / fear / belonging / important memories

- How do places hold stories?
- How does space influence experience?

Storytelling link: Connects personal narrative with social and physical context.

Media Representation Reflection

To analyze how LGBTQIA+ stories appear in media.

How it works: Participants watch clips, read articles, or review social media content.

- What stereotypes appear?
- What is missing or simplified?

Storytelling link: Builds awareness of dominant vs. marginalized narratives.

Activism Case Study Discussion

To understand storytelling in social movements.

How it works: Facilitator presents a real example (campaign, protest, movement).

- What story was told?
- Why was it effective or not?

Storytelling link: Shows how stories drive social change and mobilization.

Key facilitation note for all activities

Always prepare participants before going into real-world spaces: clarify purpose / discuss safety / set ethical boundaries (especially consent and representation).

ACTIVITIES:

"What is Next?" Future Mapping

Aim

To help participants connect their experience to future actions and personal development.

Group size

Any

Time

20–30 minutes

Materials

Paper and pens (optional)

Step-by-step instructions

1. Introduce the activity as a moment to think about what comes after the training.
2. Ask participants to reflect individually on simple questions, such as: What do I want to do next? What will I take from this experience?
3. Give participants a few minutes to think or write.
4. Invite them to share in pairs or small groups.
5. Optionally, bring the group back together and ask for a few volunteers to share.
6. Keep sharing brief and focused.
7. Close by encouraging participants to take small, realistic steps forward.

Facilitation notes

Keep the focus practical. Avoid making the activity feel abstract or overwhelming.

Storytelling link

This activity supports future-oriented storytelling, helping participants see themselves as active agents shaping what comes next.

Cross-Cutting Dimension: Embodied and Play-Based Storytelling

Embodied and play-based storytelling can be integrated across all phases of the model. It supports participants in experiencing and communicating stories through movement, gesture, physical presence and interaction, alongside verbal, written and visual forms.

In this dimension, storytelling is understood as something that is felt and performed, not only described. Activities use movement, space, and improvisation to explore emotions, relationships, and situations. This allows participants to engage in storytelling in a more immediate and intuitive way.

Play is an important element here. It creates a low-pressure environment where participants can experiment, take risks, and try out different roles or perspectives without needing to explain or justify them. This supports creativity and helps reduce fear of making mistakes.

Embodied work also increases awareness of non-verbal communication, such as posture, gesture, and presence. These are key elements of how stories are expressed and understood in real life.

From a wellbeing perspective, movement and play can help release tension, support emotional expression and increase engagement. They may also create additional forms of participation for people who find verbal communication difficult.

As a cross-cutting dimension, embodiment can support trust-building, reflection, creative expression, co-creation and sharing throughout the storytelling process.

ACTIVITIES:

Chair Game (Movement & Awareness)

Aim

To activate the body, increase energy, and explore awareness of space and others.

Group size

10–25 participants

Time

10–15 minutes

Materials

Chairs (one less than the number of participants)

Step-by-step instructions

1. Arrange chairs randomly around the room. There should be one fewer chair than participants.
2. Ask participants to walk around the space.
3. Explain that when you give a signal (e.g., clap), participants must sit on a chair.
4. One person will not find a chair and becomes "in the middle."
5. Continue the game. Participants cannot return to the same chair each round.
6. The person in the middle tries to find a seat in the next round.
7. Keep the game moving for several rounds.
8. Gradually slow down and bring the group to a stop.
9. Invite a short reflection: How did it feel to move and react quickly?

Facilitation notes

Keep the atmosphere playful, monitor physical risks and ensure that participants have enough space to move without collisions. .

Storytelling link

This activity builds awareness of movement and presence, which are part of how stories are physically expressed.

ACTIVITIES:

Image Theatre (Body as Story)

Aim

To explore storytelling through still images created with the body.

Group size

3–6 participants per group

Time

30–45 minutes

Materials

None

Step-by-step instructions

1. Divide participants into small groups.
2. Explain that each group will create a "frozen image" using their bodies to represent a situation or theme.
3. Give a simple prompt (e.g., inclusion, exclusion, power, support).
4. Allow groups time to create their image. No speaking during the creation.
5. Invite each group to present their image to the others.
6. Ask observers: What do you see? What is happening?
7. Allow the group to briefly explain their intention if they wish.
8. Optionally, invite participants to slightly change the image to show a different outcome.
9. Close with a short reflection.

Facilitation notes

Focus on observation rather than interpretation. Avoid "correct" answers.

Storytelling link

This activity demonstrates non-verbal storytelling and how meaning can be created through the body.

ACTIVITIES:

Role Play (Simple Scenarios)

Aim

To explore situations and perspectives through acting.

Group size

3–5 participants per group

Time

30–45 minutes

Materials

Optional scenario prompts

Step-by-step instructions

1. Divide participants into small groups.
2. Give each group a simple scenario (e.g., a conversation, a conflict, a moment of support).
3. Ask participants to assign roles within the group.
4. Give time to prepare a short scene.
5. Invite groups to perform their scene.
6. After each performance, ask observers what they noticed.
7. Optionally discuss alternative ways the situation could unfold.
8. Close with a short reflection.

Facilitation notes

Keep scenarios simple and relatable. Avoid sensitive topics unless the group is ready.

Storytelling link

This activity supports embodied perspective-taking and lived storytelling.

ACTIVITIES:

Movement Story Chain

Aim

To create a story through movement and sequence.

Group size

Any

Time

10–15 minutes

Materials

None

Step-by-step instructions

1. Ask participants to stand in a circle.
2. One person starts with a simple movement.
3. The next person repeats the movement and adds a new one.
4. Continue around the circle, building a sequence.
5. Once complete, the group performs the full sequence together.
6. Optionally repeat with a new sequence.
7. Close with a short reflection.

Facilitation notes

Keep movements simple and easy to repeat.
Encourage attention and focus.

Storytelling link

This activity shows how stories can be built step by step through collective action.

ACTIVITIES:

Genre-Based Movement

Aim

To explore how style and emotion shape storytelling.

Group size

Any

Time

15–20 minutes

Materials

None

Step-by-step instructions

1. Ask participants to move freely in the space.
2. Call out different genres or moods (e.g., horror, comedy, drama).
3. Participants adapt their movement to match the style.
4. Change genres every 1–2 minutes.
5. Encourage participants to exaggerate and experiment.
6. Gradually bring the group back to neutral movement.
7. Close with a short reflection.

Facilitation notes

Keep the activity light and dynamic.
Encourage play, not performance.

Storytelling link

This activity shows how tone and style influence how stories are expressed and perceived.

Glossary of Key Terms

Active Listening

Listening with full attention, without interrupting, judging, or preparing a response. The focus is on understanding the speaker.

Co-creation

A process where multiple people work together to create something, such as a story, with shared ownership.

Embodied Storytelling

Storytelling that involves the body, such as movement, gesture, or physical presence, not only words.

Experiential Learning

Learning through doing and reflecting on the experience, rather than only receiving information.

Identity

How a person understands and defines themselves, including aspects such as gender, sexuality, culture, and personal experiences.

Intersectionality

The idea that people's experiences are shaped by multiple factors (such as gender, race, class, or sexuality) that interact with each other.

Narrative Ownership

The right of a person to control how their own story is told and shared.

Participation (Voluntary Participation)

Taking part in an activity by choice. Participants should always have the option not to share or engage.

Reflection

Thinking about an experience to understand what happened and what it means.

Safer Space

A physical, digital or relational environment that is actively and continuously co-created to reduce avoidable harm, discrimination, ridicule and exclusion.

Symbolic Expression

Using images, objects, or metaphors to represent ideas or experiences instead of describing them directly.

Witnessing

Listening to or receiving someone's story with attention and respect, without trying to change or judge it.

Agency

A person's ability to make choices and shape their own actions, including how they tell and share their story.

Consent

Clear and voluntary agreement to participate or share something. In storytelling, this includes permission to share personal stories or creative work.

Empathy

The ability to understand and relate to another person's feelings or experiences.

Facilitator

A person who guides the learning process, supports participants, and creates a safer, participatory and inclusive environment.

Inclusion

Creating a space where all people feel welcome, respected, and able to participate.

Narrative

A story or account of events, including how they are structured and interpreted.

Non-formal Education (NFE)

A type of learning that happens outside formal school systems, based on participation, experience, and reflection.

Perspective

The point of view from which a story is told or understood.

Representation

How people, identities, or experiences are shown or described in stories, media, or society.

Storytelling

The act of sharing experiences, ideas, or messages in the form of a story, using different formats such as speaking, writing, or creative expression.

Wellbeing

A person's overall sense of feeling good, safe, and supported, both emotionally and socially.

Zine

A small, handmade booklet that combines text and images, often used for creative and personal storytelling.

Conclusion

All proposed methods are based on the principles of non-formal education and engage participants as active co-creators of the process. Erasmus+ and Council of Europe publications emphasize the importance of inclusion, participation, and reflection (Council of Europe, 2026). Stories of queer youth function as a tool of empowerment—they show that "we are in this together" (SALTO-YOUTH, 2025).

The workshop approaches described above are supported by practical experience (projects such as VOICE, QueeResilience, Proud Spaces) and align with Erasmus+ requirements for democratic, creative, and sensitive youth work methods.

In conclusion, the success of these activities depends on a sensitive approach by the facilitator, respect for individual needs, and continuous reflection. By maintaining ethical standards and ongoing evaluation, storytelling can lead to real change—improving the wellbeing of LGBTQIA+ youth and contributing to a more inclusive environment.

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07

Digital Storytelling and LGBTQIA+ Narratives

(Emantes International LGBTQIA+ Solidarity)

7. Executive Summary

Using Emantes as a case study, this chapter explains how podcasts can serve as part of multifaceted PAR methodology informing an organisation's broader Collaborative Risk Governance Framework. Podcasts as part of PAR, facilitate co-analysis, empowerment, stakeholder engagement, and iterative data collection to identify, communicate and manage risks in the community with lived experiences they support (Hadjigeorgiou et al., 2024). This case showcases how to generate, validate and communicate bottom-up informed and co-produced knowledge; contributing to the development collaborative, trust-based risk governance frameworks within various scale institutions (Hadjigeorgiou et al., 2024) including but not limited to Our Story's partner organisations.

This chapter also highlights that Collaborative Risk Governance is necessary to both address external to the community and internal to the organisation risks. It emphasises the necessary integration of ethical safeguards including the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) compliance and reflexive practices from the design of such participatory approaches and processes to legitimise the processes and their outcomes and to protect the individual participants and the wider community they support.

7.1 Introduction

In this chapter, podcasts are analysed as a digital storytelling tool in LGBTQIA+ contexts that can serve as part of multifaceted PAR methodology informing an organisation's broader Collaborative Risk Governance Framework. The chapter uses the Emantes' podcast "Our Story: A Podcast by and for LGBTQIA+ Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Greece" as a case study.

The idea of using podcast as a storytelling tool did not emerge from a top-down decision nor a populist strategy for monetising content (Fuchs, 2014). Rather, it emerged bottom-up, from community members who gained agency by becoming volunteers, board members and trainees in Emantes. The perception was that Emantes' public image was virtually non-existent, hindering efforts to raise awareness of the contributions in the refugee and LGBTQIA+ fields. The decision for limited public exposure was informed by the high risk of personal and sensitive data leakage governing Emantes' processes.

Additionally, the practices of organisations like Emantes, providing essential services, while employing storytelling from beneficiaries to highlight their impact and potentially attract further funding, were seen as reflective of manipulative practices. This raises significant ethical dilemmas commonly associated with participatory methodologies, such as exploitation and tokenism (Arnstein, 1969). However, as time went on and Emantes completed three iterations of systematic efforts to implement bottom-up participatory approaches, they successfully fostered trust and reciprocity within the community.

Empowering the community members enabled the gradual shift of power and leadership of Emantes to the community starting from participation in community meetings to internships and extending to roles in Emantes board and professional roles (Arnstein, 1969). This shift of power also included the co-design of podcast material along with the practical development of the podcast as a PAR tool (Hadjigeorgiou, 2024) and the GDPR compliance forms (addressed in Section 7.7). Podcasts, as part of a wider PAR methodology and when integrated in a Collaborative Risk Governance Framework, can promote co-analysis and stakeholder engagement while generating new data (Hadjigeorgiou, 2024).

7.2 Podcast as PAR methodology tool

"Our Story: A Podcast by and for LGBTQIA+ Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Greece" was co-created and informed through earlier participatory activities. These included:

International LGBTQIA+ Movie Nights

Through the screening and discussion of international LGBTQ+ movies, in Emantes' offices which the participants deemed as a safe space, the community members has the opportunity to reflect on themes of migration, identity and belonging. The discussions co-facilitated by community members and a psychologist revealed the many shared emotional and social challenges, including struggles with cultural and religious norms, family rejection, and the quest for belonging within host societies.

The Faces–Objects–Stories art workshop

This workshop integrated art and play, providing community member participants a safe space and time to explore, reflect on and artistically express their experiences.

Photography workshop series

A five workshop series introduced community members to photographic skills, enabling them to develop visual storytelling skills and create their personal photo narrative illustrating their lived experiences. These activities taken together, as many participants attended all of three, gradually cultivated trust and community cohesion, and helped developed confidence to their individual lived experience narrative; all important markers for meaningful active participation in PAR (McIntyre, 2008). In this way, the podcast series consists of a later-stage PAR intervention, allowing participants to transition from simple expression to the articulation, interpretation, and dissemination of their own narratives.

7.3 Podcasts as a PAR tool for helping to empower and reclaim participants' identities

Podcasts as a PAR tool, have the potential to empower and reclaim the identity of participants and audiences with lived experience. Central to this cause is the active involvement of individuals in sharing their lived experiences, which enables a nuanced exploration of critical issues such as food insecurity and personal journeys. Participants are not merely recipients of narratives but are empowered to: Define the stories that hold significance for them; Determine the methods through which these stories are conveyed; Engage in meaningful peer-to-peer dialogue within a supportive and safe network.

The aims of the podcast are: to establish a peer network; to create a safe space for dialogue among community members; to raise awareness of the community's lived experiences; to empower community members to confront and challenge prevalent stereotypes and dominant narratives by giving them the language to articulate these and model validation of their experiences.

This podcast is a powerful PAR tool allowing participation to move from tokenistic consultation (e.g., discussions in community meetings) to partnership (e.g., co-facilitation of workshops) through to citizen control (Arnstein, 1969). Community members are not only participating but there are hosts, co-host who have been empowered to share their own stories reflecting also on the whole (subset of) community experience that they are representing. This way, community members shape both the knowledge produced and what is disseminated (Arnstein, 1969). This transformative process, core to the PAR mission of social change, highlights the importance of participatory practices in fostering empowerment and community resilience.

7.4 Podcast as a PAR co-analysis tool

The podcast served as a platform for collaborative interpretation of community members' individual and collective lived experiences as expressed and explored in previous participatory work.

Examples included the Emantes food insecurity statistics at population level which served as a probe for the discussion agenda of the first podcast episode. These probes indicated that "Over 90% of LGBTQ+ refugees seeking assistance in Emantes are food insecure, with more than 70% reporting food support as their primary or secondary need." (Emantes, 2024) and "Crucially, food insecurity manifests across a spectrum, ranging from mild to severe, with 90% of refugees experiencing moderate to severe levels, resulting in instances of skipped meals and going to bed hungry." (Emantes, 2024)

The podcast's thematic discourse was also informed and enriched by the themes explored during the international LGBTQIA+ movie nights. The emerging themes around identity and lived experience included persecution, self-acceptance and associated mental health issues, including anxiety and depression. One participant said: "This movie reminded me of my coming out. Even though my experience occurred in a completely different context, I strongly resonated with the feelings and anxieties of the protagonist, who was a gay man".

Co-facilitators noted various responses after the movie screenings, with a specific subset of community members, predominantly gay men, perceiving a film as "too lesbian" and, therefore, less relatable to their lived experiences. However, this movie screening represented the first occasion where three lesbian community members attended, signifying the highest, by then, attendance of cisgender women during the international LGBTQIA+ movie nights. These participants expressed appreciation for a narrative that authentically represented their sexuality, underscoring the necessity for inclusive programming that addresses the broader LGBTQIA+ spectrum. Movie screening were advertised in advance to the community members, showcasing the importance of community representation for higher participation. This also highlighted reciprocity as a mechanism for participation as lesbian community members attended community activities more frequently thereafter.

In turn, the photographic workshop series enabled participants to gradually transition from the visual to the verbal storytelling of their lived experiences, which allowed for further enriching their own narratives with reflections and meaning-making of the experiences of other individuals and the collective community. According to Malchiodi (2012) and aligned with art therapy theory, visual processing of lived experiences is more accessible than verbal, allowing community members to process and communicate emotions non-verbally can enable later on articulate them verbally.

Overall, the podcast as a PAR co-analysis tool was community-led by community members hosts and co-hosts, informing both the content and shaping the direction of the episodes. This reflects a shift from researcher-led analysis to participant-led co-analysis, harnessing the emancipatory potential of PAR by redistributing power to the affected community (Arnstein, 1969).

7.5 Participation by design: Mechanisms for Engagement and Inclusion

The integration of mechanisms that facilitate inclusion and engagement in participatory processes is important, especially in contexts of underrepresented and/or marginalised communities such as the LGBTQIA+ communities. This is especially true for the intersectionally marginalised community Emantes supports; LGBTQ+ refugees primarily of colour seeking asylum in a predominantly white country. A multi-entry pathway that incorporates layered opportunities for participation, such as surveys (e.g., food insecurity experience scale), autoethnography (e.g., photography workshop series), workshops (e.g., The Faces-Objects-Stories art workshop), international LGBTQIA+ movie nights, and podcast participation, in the case of Emantes, enables a staged engagement. This gradual approach allows the respective community member to control the level of exposure they are comfortable with, promoting trust and self-confidence that can transition into more visible forms of storytelling, like podcasting (Hadjigeorgiou et al., 2024).

The process also underscores the importance of offering incentivization and capacity building opportunities for meaningful participation through tangible and intangible rewards respectively. In the case of Emantes these included paid trainships, financial compensation, skills development, recognition, and career advancement opportunities irrespective of and additional to the services they received as part of the Emantes' pipeline (legal, psychological, social and food provision). This is particularly important in PAR within LGBTQIA+ contexts. The recognition of community members as co-creators rather than subjects counters manipulative and tokenistic dynamics of participation (Arnstein, 1969). This approach fosters community resilience through cultivating long-term capacity within the community.

Another mechanism of engagement and inclusion is the democratisation of decision-making. When projects and processes derive from strictly top-down approaches or rely on published literature the power of lived experience and the affected community's role in shaping the change necessary to improve their own lives is undermined. Through bottom-up informed participant-led intervention selection and co-produced outputs, the necessity of bottom-up design and context-specific knowledge production is highlighted.

Throughout PAR, trust becomes an important component. This is especially true in contexts where disclosure of identity can carry significant risk, such in the case of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers in Emantes. Trust is both gradually and systematically constructed through personalised communication, active listening, reciprocity, homophily via representation and/or employment of community members as facilitators, and gradual participation exposure pathways.

Finally, harnessing digital affordances using accessible mobile platforms (e.g., WhatsApp in the case of Emantes) permits flexible participation, effectively lowering the barriers to participation (e.g., living in remote refugee camps or fear of arrest or harassment in the case of Emantes). This hybrid approach accommodates diverse communication styles and literacy (e.g., video, voice messages, writing in different languages) while fostering engagement with topics that require absolute discretion and anonymity. (Hadjigeorgiou et al., 2024).

7.6 Podcast as an iterative primary data collection tool

The podcast also served as a primary data collection tool. Through discussions among peers or with the Emantes' lawyer with whom they had established collaboration in their legal cases, community members were able to discuss previously unarticulated experiences; reflect on sensitive topics (e.g., survival strategies), and develop emergent collective themes that arose from earlier workshops and activities from their own specific experiences.

An example encompassing the aforementioned points was a dialogue in the first podcast episode, pertaining to survival sex as the only means of earning an income in rural Greece as a lesbian woman refugee of color. The participant shared that this experience ultimately empowered her and gave her a stronger sense of security regarding her lesbian identity as she moved to Athens in search of employment, embracing who she was without shame. The host validated her experience, sharing that sex work for trans women remains a survival strategy even within urban settings, expanding a theme that previously emerged in Emantes' PAR workshops.

This iterative process of data generation aligns with the cyclical nature of PAR (Reason and Bradbury, 2008), focusing on reflection and action as central components of the PAR process. The steps in this process can be summarised in Figure 7.1.



Figure 7.1: Iterative PAR Data Generation Process

Therefore, the podcast served as both a dynamic tool for knowledge production and dissemination, enriching the dataset of lived experiences and enhancing analytical insights while empowering the individual and collective community members. This showcases how discussion through the incorporation of innovative tools, such as podcasts, can promote critical consciousness and foster deeper engagement and understanding within and about a community alongside active participation in research.

7.7 PAR storytelling and Ethical governance

Ethical governance, informed by the GDPR, is critical to address PAR risks pertaining to personal and sensitive information, especially with the use of public dissemination tools such as podcasts.

GDPR and Ethical governance

Public dissemination via social and/or mass media of PAR findings can present significant risks to the participating community members, especially to marginalised groups, such as LGBTQIA+ refugees and asylum seekers. The issues pertain to the use of informed consent and any personal identifiable or sensitive that can lead to identity exposure and digital traceability. To mitigate these risks, the case study employed GDPR-compliant consent protocols within the Collaborative Risk Governance Framework (see Chapter 8). Participants were informed about data usage, had the right to withdraw consent, and maintained control over their visibility. They were afforded their data rights including access, rectification, and erasure, with secure data storage for a limited duration, thus embedding trust through ethical integrity. Separate informed consent forms were drafted for podcast hosts and co-host as the outputs once uploaded on social media could never be fully rectified or erased.

Reflexive Practice in Risk Mitigation

Ethical governance should be sensitive to context (e.g., intersectionality, persecution, legal status, threads and harassments). Therefore, the need to always offer complete anonymisation and a flexible iterative project design is of paramount importance. For example, all Emantes PAR activities were suspended for weeks until relocation to a safe space was secured. This was in response to the breach of safe space once activities gained attention from mass media. This highlights the need for flexibility in PAR, especially in vulnerable contexts.

Reflection on Risk: The Emantes case study presented in this chapter underscores the tension between visibility and protection first introduced in Section 7.1. While exposure and representation in social and mass media can empower marginalised voices, it can also expose participants to risks. This chapter emphasises the need for Collaborative Risk Governance (see Chapter 8) to ensure participant-controlled informed consent and the option of complete anonymity to ensure participants' agency over their representation.

7.8 Synthesis of learnings

A useful tool to appraise a PAR project is Arnstein's "Ladder of Participation" (Arnstein, 1969). Using the example of Emantes case study, this section will demonstrate how to appraise a project's participatory level measured against the power distribution it afforded to its participants (Figure 7.2). It is important to note that such appraisals remain self-reflective evaluation tools for both practitioners and researchers to assess the potential for their projects and engagement strategies to become more inclusive and democratic in order to fulfil the emancipatory potential of PAR; to shift the power to the affected community.

Figure 7.2. Emantes' case study appraisal using Arnstein's Ladder of Participation



7.8 Synthesis of learnings

Citizen Led/Delegate Power

At the top of Arnstein's ladder of participation is the "Citizen Led/Delegate Power" stage, where community members lead the decision-making process. In the case of Emantes this is exercised by initiatives like the podcast series as a platform for primary data collection and co-analysis, including validation of previously collected findings where they lead and control the dissemination outcomes, promoting social change. A photo exhibition invites stakeholders to engage with project findings and provide feedback, fostering a collaborative environment where LGBTQIA+ refugees and asylum seekers feel their voices are valued, creating a sense of ownership.

Collaborate

The "Collaborate" stage of Arnstein's ladder highlights the partnership between citizens and decision-makers. Emantes uses digital surveys to assess community needs, focusing on issues such as food insecurity and mental well-being. Tools such as the Food Insecurity Experience Scale and Warwick Mental Wellbeing Scale help gather insights for ongoing monitoring and evaluation. This collaborative approach ensures diverse community voices are heard, leading to a better understanding of challenges and the development of targeted, data-driven interventions.

Involve/Engage

The "Involve/Engage" phase emphasises the importance of participatory mechanisms that include community members in discussing their needs and challenges. Emantes uses PAR workshops (e.g., Journey mapping, Fishbone diagram, photography workshop series; international LGBTQIA+ movie nights) to help community members explore, reflect and express issues at both individual and collective levels. These workshops therefore enable the collective exploration of promoting and hindering factors and mechanisms affecting the community, ensuring this way that this knowledge informs bottom-up strategic planning enhancing this way the relevance and effectiveness of community interventions.

Enquire/Educate

The respective level of participation focuses on enquiring information from the community members through structured dialogue performing top down data collection and analysis. In Emantes' case study this began with a situational analysis involving practitioners and professionals of the organisation. Interviews and workshops gathered valuable insights, which were then validated through available context specific statistics and peer reviewed literature. The enquire level of participation serves to create an initial knowledge base on the problem(s) the organisation and/or community faces and ground this information in any related validated information (such as statistics and peer reviewed literature) to both legitimise the existence of the problems in the set context and/or identify appropriate interventions to address these. Educational efforts aim to connect expert knowledge with community experience, empowering individuals to discuss potential interventions.

Inform

The respective level of participation features at the base of Arnstein's ladder. concerns top-down decision-making to interventions and wider projects affecting excluding the affected community from any power to shape decision-making or active involvement. This one-way flow of information can result in interventions that don't meet the community's actual needs, fostering distrust and disengagement. (Hadjigeorgiou, 2024).

7.9 Application and Transferability of the Framework: The Our Story Perspective

The framework described in this chapter goes beyond the unique experience of the Emantes podcast and embodies the wider methodological vision of the Our Story – Storytelling for LGBTQIA+ Community Wellbeing project. Throughout this project, storytelling has been viewed not just as a means of communication, but as a participatory process through which individuals and communities create knowledge, enhance wellbeing, and foster social change. This perspective is shared by all project partners and is reflected in the manual's focus on participation, co-creation, safe and brave spaces, inclusive language, and reflective learning.

7.9.1 Application

As part of the Our Story project, the approach to participatory digital storytelling was gradually adapted from a community-based practice developed through the Emantes case study into a collective transnational methodology. The principles of participation, ethical storytelling, co-creation, and community ownership informed the project's theoretical storytelling model (Chapter 6), the creation of shared language and inclusive practices (Chapters 2–4), strategic planning for social change (Chapter 8), reflective learning tools (Chapter 9), and the project's policy recommendations (Chapter 10). In this way, the framework evolved from a local Participatory Action Research initiative into a comprehensive educational and organisational strategy that supported international Erasmus+ cooperation while remaining adaptable to diverse local community contexts. More specifically:

The theoretical model presented in Chapter 6 expands upon practical applications. Rather than concentrating on a single local case, Chapter 6 integrates experiences from the project into what is referred to as the Storytelling Synthesis Model, which consists of personal reflection, expression, collaborative creation, narrative skills, sharing and visibility, social action and embodiment.

This reflects the conceptual shift of practices initially examined in local contexts such as Emantes. The glossary, code of conduct, and safer-space principles implement the framework in practice. Chapters 2–4 converted the participatory principles into actionable organisational tools: common language, LGBTQIA+ glossary, safer and brave spaces, code of conduct, accessibility, ethical participation, consent and privacy.

These are precisely the governance mechanisms identified in this chapter (Chapter 7) as necessary for ethical participatory storytelling. Rather than being confined to the Emantes podcast, they developed into standards applicable project-wide.

Chapter 8 broadens the framework to encompass strategic planning. In Chapter 8, storytelling is introduced as a mechanism for social and cultural change, linking it to the Theory of Change and collaborative governance. This illustrates another transition: participatory storytelling → organisational planning → policy and social change, rather than remaining solely an educational activity.

Chapter 9 adapts this into reflective learning. The reflective practices (Youthpass, Fishbone, walk-and-talk reflection, civic competences) show that storytelling has also been incorporated into evaluation and learning processes. Thus, the framework evolved into implementation, reflection, competence recognition, and organisational learning, rather than concluding with the production of digital stories.

Chapter 10 discusses the transfer of knowledge at both organisational and policy levels. The final chapter explicitly addresses lessons learned, recommendations, organisational improvements, policy suggestions for NGOs and Erasmus+. This serves as evidence that the knowledge generated through participatory storytelling informed future practice beyond the original activities.

7.9.2 Transferability

The framework can be adapted to a broad range of both local and international contexts. In international initiatives such as Erasmus+ Youth Exchanges, Training Courses, Cooperation Partnerships, European Solidarity Corps projects, or other transnational youth programmes, the framework can facilitate intercultural dialogue, promote social inclusion, foster community building, and encourage participatory learning. Storytelling activities allow participants from diverse cultural and social backgrounds to share experiences, cultivate empathy, enhance intercultural competencies, and engage in collaborative reflections on shared challenges while respecting the diversity of individual experiences.

At the local level, this framework can also support the efforts of community organisations, municipalities, schools, universities, youth centres, cultural institutions, and civil society organisations. Digital storytelling can be woven into community consultations, youth engagement initiatives, psychosocial support programmes, educational efforts, advocacy campaigns, or the development of local policies. In these contexts, storytelling serves as both a tool for individual empowerment and a means to bolster community participation, generate relevant local knowledge, and encourage dialogue between communities and decision-makers.

Crucially, the adaptability of this framework does not rely solely on the use of podcasts. While podcasting was the main medium utilised in the Emantes case study, the same theoretical concepts can be applied through various participatory and creative formats, including video production, photography, digital exhibitions, written narratives, community archives, theatre, visual arts, or other forms of digital and artistic expression. What remains unchanged is the participatory process itself: the ethical co-creation of knowledge, respect for participants' ownership of their stories, collaborative reflection, and the use of storytelling as a means for inclusion, well-being, and social transformation.

Thus, the Our Story project illustrates that participatory digital storytelling provides a versatile methodological framework rather than merely acting as a single intervention. Its principles can be tailored to suit different cultural, institutional, and geographical settings while continuing to prioritise inclusion, ethical participation, community empowerment, and sustainable social change. Consequently, this framework offers practical guidance for organisations aiming to develop educational, research, or community-oriented initiatives that centre around lived experiences and participant agency in the processes of learning and development.

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L REVOLTING

08

Digital storytelling as a tool of a Collaborative Risk Governance framework: A tool for social justice

(Emantes International LGBTQIA+ Solidarity)



8. Executive Summary

Emantes employs digital storytelling tools as part of their Collaborative Risk Governance Framework aiming to raise awareness of the issues faced and promote social justice for the LGBTQIA+ refugees and asylum seekers. This chapter introduces the logical framework that underpins Emantes' use of digital storytelling and how this is informed by and translated into structured bottom-up informed pipeline of services, community actions, and pathways for advocacy.

8.1 Introduction

8.1.1. Introducing the Collaborative Risk Governance Framework

As covered in Chapter 7, initiatives that employ digital storytelling, involve active participation, and cater to vulnerable communities, such as the LGBTQIA+ refugees in Emantes case, face various challenges. These include but are not limited to access to participation, ethical and safeguarding considerations, language and literacy barriers, level of participation, organisational capacity and wider context specific political and social climate. To address these barriers, an organisation needs to do more than identify top-down the emerging risks. Instead, it requires a continuous collaboration among organisations and the community members they support to assess their risk appetite and create mitigating plans for each identified risk, including building the capacity and designing flexibility in their initiatives in order to be able to adjust their practices if necessary without compromising the organisation's mission or the safety of the community they support.

The Our Story project and its partners embraced a Collaborative Risk Governance Framework to promote a shared responsibility among organisations, facilitators and participants for managing risks in the processes and outcomes during and after the completion of this project. Through ongoing reflection, open communication, and collective decision-making, risks have been transformed into opportunities to learn, inform best practices, and reinforce both the sustainability and do-no-harm obligation of project outcomes.

8.1.2. The Collaborative Risk Governance Framework within the Our Story project context

The Collaborative Risk Governance Framework outlined in this chapter did not originate from the Our Story project itself. Its initial development was influenced by prior work on participatory risk identification and collaborative governance carried out across various initiatives, including three community-based projects, one of which was Emantes. These earlier experiences demonstrated that the most effective way to identify and address risks is through a collaborative and continuous process that involves participants, facilitators, and organisations alike.

The Our Story project provided an opportunity to extend these approaches beyond their original local settings into an international context. Although the project did not aim to formally validate the framework, it created a transnational environment in which its underlying principles were implemented across different organisations, cultural contexts, and educational activities. In this way, the project reinforced the importance of collaboratively identifying, discussing, and responding to risks while adapting practices to diverse organisational and national contexts.

Chapter 2

The Collaborative Risk Governance Framework is reflected throughout the Our Story manual. Chapter 2 establishes the ethical foundations for participatory practice by emphasising shared language, participant ownership of narratives, informed consent, and inclusive communication. These principles recognise that ethical storytelling requires continuous dialogue, mutual respect, and shared responsibility among all those involved.

Chapters 3 and 4

Building on these foundations, Chapters 3 and 4 translate these values into organisational and facilitation practices by developing inclusive codes of conduct, meaningful participant involvement, safer and supportive spaces, accessibility measures, group agreements, conflict mediation, and community care. Rather than treating safeguarding and inclusion as isolated procedures, these chapters demonstrate how anticipating challenges, responding to participants' needs, and collaboratively adapting activities become integral elements of project implementation.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7

The same participatory principles continue to underpin the storytelling methodologies presented in Chapters 5, 6, and 7. Storytelling is framed not only as a means of sharing experiences but also as a process of self-reflection, co-creation, dialogue, empowerment, and collective knowledge generation. Chapter 7 further illustrates how participatory approaches developed through community-based practice can be applied within broader educational and social contexts while maintaining participant ownership, ethical engagement, and reflective practice.

Chapters 9 and 10

These experiences are then extended into organisational development. Chapter 9 presents reflective learning, evaluation, competence recognition, and continuous improvement as essential mechanisms for strengthening both participants and organisations. Finally, Chapter 10 synthesises the lessons learned throughout the project into recommendations for future youth work practice, organisational development, and policy, demonstrating how collaborative learning can inform sustainable change beyond the lifetime of a single project.

Viewed in this broader context, the Collaborative Risk Governance Framework should not be understood simply as a project management tool. Rather, it provides a structure that brings together the participatory principles developed throughout the Our Story manual—from ethical storytelling and inclusive facilitation to organisational learning and strategic planning. The Collaborative Risk Governance Framework itself was developed prior to the Our Story project, with applications in various contexts including underrepresented minority in higher education, food poverty in community centres and LGBTQIA+ refugees (Hadjigeorgiou, 2024). However, the framework is applied for the first time across multiple organisations with different contexts collaborating in a single project: Our Story. This collaboration demonstrated that the collective identification of emerging risks and the co-development and adoption of mitigating strategies are practices that can be exercised bottom-up and top-down and horizontally across different organisations community-based initiatives and transnational youth work. This chapter demonstrates the transferability of the Collaborative Risk Governance Framework from a context-specific practice (Emantes case study) to international collaboration (Our Story project), reinforcing participation, inclusion, and continuous learning as core principles of sustainable youth work.

8.1 Introduction

8.1.3: Emantes' Contextual challenges and the need for storytelling-based interventions

LGBTQIA+ refugees and asylum seekers face unique and significant challenges due to their identities including but not limited to **legal status precarity, severe loneliness, food poverty, mental health issues** (Emantes, 2022, 2024, 2025). Their lived experiences are affected by both the reality of displacement and forced migration and by the discrimination ingrained in asylum systems and the broader society in the host country (Powell, 2021; Pelters et al., 2022). As a result, many LGBTQIA+ refugees find it difficult to participate in social and civic life, feeling caught between the need for integration and acceptance and the emerging risk that visibility can bring (see Chapter 7).

One of the key issues the community members face is the **under- and misrepresentation in narratives of refugee experiences** (Yarwood et al., 2022). Most institutional accounts, whether these come from policies, media portrayals, or the service offered, tend to generalise information about refugee populations, failing to account for issues faced only by LGBTQIA+ subset of the refugee population. Even within the LGBTQIA+ identity umbrella, experiences can differ drastically based on various factors such a specific subset of LGBTQIA+ identity combined with ethnicity (Emantes, 2022, 2024, 2025). Therefore, when interventions are designed without active participation from the communities they are trying to help, they risk becoming contextually irrelevant or exclusionary, thereby perpetuating the very inequalities they seek to ameliorate.

Moreover, LGBTQIA+ refugees struggle with access barriers to **safe community spaces**. Factors such as loneliness, language barriers, asylum status precarity, and fears of harassment, persecution and discrimination can limit their capacity to engage with both mainstream LGBTQIA+ communities and broader refugee support networks (Emantes, 2022, 2024, 2025). These issues can severely diminish the community members' sense of belonging undermining this way important opportunities for **collective voice, peer support, and community-led advocacy**. Recognising these hindering factors to access and participation is important to inform the design and implementation of inclusive practices.

Another significant issue is the limited access that LGBTQIA+ individuals—especially those from refugee or asylum-seeking backgrounds—have to **decision-making processes**. Traditionally, risk identification and related decision-making are led by experts. However, what occurs when early warnings of risk are embedded in the lived experiences of marginalised and underrepresented communities? Citizen science has become an important methodology for community members to help uncover emerging risks and their underlying factors (drivers), especially those that remain unknown, due to lack of exposure and lived experience, to the scientific community and decision-makers (Hadjigeorgiou et al., 2022). These individuals are often not recognised as knowledge producers or valuable stakeholders within institutional frameworks and official processes; instead, they are treated as passive recipients of services (Dixson, 2024). This not only diminishes their sense of agency but also hinders the integration of lived experience into the design of policies and interventions (Dryden-Peterson, 2016).

Conventional methods of advocacy and research tend to rely on peer reviewed documents and expert opinions for knowledge production (Hadjigeorgiou et al., 2022). While such methods are important in assessing probabilities of known risks occurring, they risk society being left blind to the unknown (by the experts) risk(s) by excluding community members with lived experience while at the same time they reinforce existing inequalities in participation in risk governance processes (Hadjigeorgiou, 2024). **Participatory methods are therefore important to facilitate inclusive, meaningful, and sustained engagement** (see Chapter 7).

Within this milieu, storytelling emerges as a pivotal methodological and strategic response. Storytelling, particularly when integrated into participatory frameworks and as part of a wider collaborative risk governance framework, facilitates: The articulation of lived experiences in diverse and accessible formats; The co-production of knowledge grounded in community realities; The development of collective identity and solidarity and The translation of personal narratives into advocacy and institutional dialogue.

The Collaborative Risk Governance framework (Hadjigeorgiou, 2024) responds to these challenges by positioning storytelling not merely as a tool for expression but as a **structured pathway for social and cultural transformation**. Emantes, for example, through three iterations of the framework incorporating **participatory design, multi-platform storytelling, and participant-led advocacy**, gradually addressed gaps in representation, participation, and institutional responsiveness (Emantes, 2022, 2024, 2025).

This chapter will offer an overview of the Emantes application of the **Collaborative Risk Governance framework**, beginning with an introduction to the broader framework theory. It will then focus on how to develop context-based Theories of Change, and finally, it will outline practical tools and lessons for incorporating storytelling into wider strategies.

8.2 Introduction to the Collaborative Risk Governance Framework

The Collaborative Risk Governance Framework is an integrated sequence of ecosystems demonstrating the need for consistency, continuity and multiple iterations of a risk problem solution such as the challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ community members in an ever-evolving context in the real world (Figure 8.1). This phenomenological view of different practices rooted in epistemology informs institutions and grassroots as well as academics, practitioners and policymakers how risk governance can be transformed from a top-down and relying on historic data to a bottom up democratic process rooted in near real-time and continuous data streaming when using different types of methods and data allowing for more transparency over decision making, stakeholder accountability, uptake by the public and most importantly access to knowledge pertaining ambiguous, uncertain and complex risks improving chances of predictability of emerging risks (Hadjigeorgiou, 2024).



Figure 8.1. Overview of the Collaborative Risk Governance Framework (Hadjigeorgiou, 2024)

At Micro-level the bottom-up informed collaborative risk governance framework can inform the co-design of interventions, services, by empathising with the affected public (Hadjigeorgiou, 2024) Systematic collection of experiential risk from the individual to the community level informs <i>Design Thinking</i> for social innovation at organisational level (Hadjigeorgiou, 2024)	At the Meso-level, Context-Mechanism- Outcome scenarios based on narratives of the community with experiential uncertainty and triangulated from practitioners or published data inform Risk governance decision-making at the organisational level to 1. Shape context condition and/or 2. Develop precautionary approaches and/or 3. Reduce vulnerability (Hadjigeorgiou, 2024).	At the Macro-level, co-produced knowledge via monitoring and evaluation of risk and opportunities emerging from evolving contexts with the application of different and multiple iterations of risk governance approaches provides insights for agenda specification, expansion and policy formulation in the Policy Cycle (Hadjigeorgiou, 2024).
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8.2 Introduction to the Collaborative Risk Governance Framework

The collaboration of community members as citizen scientists and practitioners as researcher activists extends to all lifecycle stages of the proposed framework, using bottom-up data-driven decision-making and implementation with community evaluation to inform the next lifecycle iteration of interventions, services, and, finally, public policy at the macro level. Parallel stages of each lifecycle can overlap, informing and enriching one another with lifecycle specific methods and findings. These are:

- 1

Empathising with the Affected, Setting the Agenda: The approach utilised Citizen Science methods with digital media as an enabler to identify lived experiences and experiential uncertainty. In Emantes these include open-ended online surveys administered via the WhatsApp Support Line, autoethnography, workshops with online surveys for group reflection, deliberation and consensus building and podcasts as peer to peer primary data collection and secondary data analysis, validating themes with lived experience that previously emerged by other participants or anecdotal.
- 2

Defining the Problem and Developing Scenarios: Transitioning from Context-Mechanism-Outcome configurations to Theories of Change and Logical Frameworks emphasises realism and evolution for policy formulation.
- 3

Ideating and Strategic Decision Making: Deliberations explore options for risk management decision-making, including reducing vulnerabilities, shaping context conditions, developing precautionary approaches, modifying the organization's risk appetite, and utilizing conventional risk management instruments.
- 4

Prototyping and Implementation Strategies: Methodology involves the triangulation of Citizen Science and Expert methods, incorporating surveys, workshops, digital ethnography, and peer-to-peer working groups, as well as reports from practitioners, systematic reviews, and published data.
- 5

Testing and Evaluation: Monitoring, evaluation, and co-analysis are carried out using validated surveys, qualitative and quantitative reports from practitioners and experts, podcasts as co-analysis tools from participants and practitioners, and participatory write-ups (Hadjigeorgiou, 2024).

Structural Logic Models, such as Theory of Change, can be a useful tool to depict, test and fundraise for program theories for each strategy. These are co-developed by the affected communities and the organisations working for them in a bottom-up approach and it will be the specific focus of this chapter as a universal strategic planning tool that can be integrated in LGBTQIA+ organisations.

8.3 Theory of Change: Storytelling for Social and Cultural Transformation

Theory of Change is a useful illustrative and narrative strategic tool for exploring, identifying and mapping the social transformation desired by the affected communities and the steps and resources necessary to achieve it in the short, medium and long term. This section will introduce the principles of a structured Theory of Change pathway through the Emantes case study (Figure 8.2). Using storytelling interventions, the case study exhibits how inputs, activities, outputs, and their anticipated outcomes over time can lead to the desired transformation by the affected community.

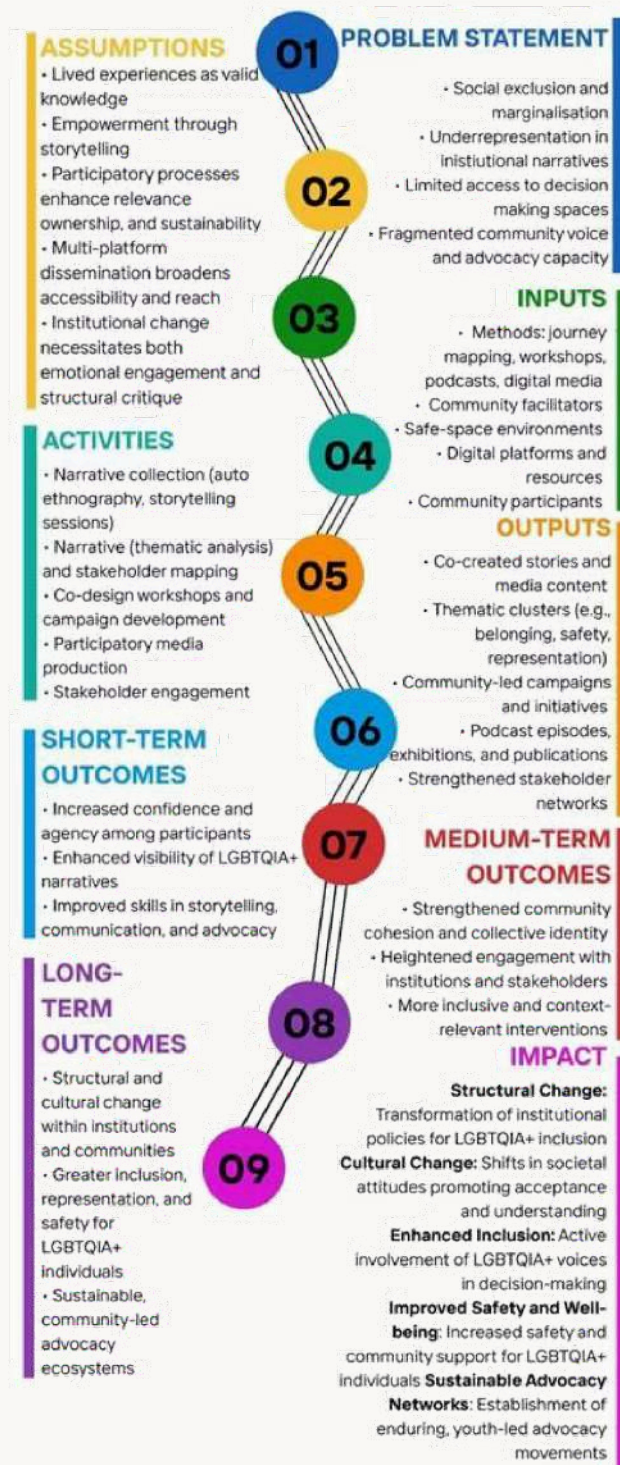


Figure 8.2. Theory of Change

1. Problem Statement

Often the first or second (after desired Impact) step in Theory of Change, is the identification of the problem affecting the community. Only by understanding the problems and their elements, can an organisation design an (or a set of) intervention(s) to effectively address it. In the case of Emantes, LGBTQIA+ refugees and asylum seekers face social exclusion and marginalisation and daily struggles to survive, including but not limited to severe food insecurity, loneliness and low mental well being. Taken together, these systemic barriers limit their access to decision-making spaces. Understanding each barrier is necessary to design targeted and effective interventions.

2. Assumptions

The Emantes case study is built on several assumptions that should be taken into consideration for both the design and Collaborative Risk Governance of the respective project. These are: 1. Individual and collective community lived experiences are valid sources of knowledge; 2. Storytelling in general and digital storytelling in particular is a legitimate and powerful tool – when integrated within a PAR methodology and Collaborative Risk Governance framework- to empower and mobilise communities towards transformational action and to raise awareness and funds for the project; 3. Political and social climate remains relatively safe to disseminate content without risking the safety of the organisation, community members and their cause; 4. Improving LGBTQIA+ refugees' lives and promoting their human rights remains a legitimate and well-funded agenda in the international community. Assumptions often collapse with time and therefore it is of paramount importance for organisations and communities to acknowledge these in order to prepare via creating contingency plans or making the most of the opportunities they have in present time. In the case of Emantes, assumptions 3 and 4 collapsed in 2024 and 2025 respectively with detrimental effects to the organisation and their cause. This increased the importance of Emantes's recorded storytelling, which captured the lived realities of the affected community while it had the opportunity.

3. Inputs

The success of projects rely on strategically selecting resources driving the desired transformation which include active participation of community members and are within (or not far from) the organisation's existing capacity. In the Emantes case study these can be divided into material/infrastructure and human resources. Material resources include but are not limited to a safe space, a projector, a photo/video camera and access to platforms for dissemination. Human resources include skilled facilitators, media professional and GDPR lawyer or existing/adapted personal data governance forms for meaningful, efficient and safe engagement with the community and public.

4. Activities

Activities operationalise inputs to yield to the desired outcomes. In the Emantes case study, these include digital storytelling activities such as photography workshop series, international LGBTQIA+ movie nights and podcasts. As per PAR (Chapter 7) activities are iterative; each building on and being informed by previous activities and transforming gradually individual to collective narratives and courses of action. Co-designing and co-facilitating activities with community members is crucial to shift the power and project ownership to the affected community as well as to increase engagement via representation in both decision making and implementation of the project.

5. Outputs

Outputs are the tangible metrics of the activities representing meaningful progress. In the Emantes's case study these are: 10 individual photo projects, 7 movie screenings, 3 podcast episodes.

6. Short-term outcomes

Short-term outcomes represent the immediate results of the implemented activities. In the Emantes's case study these are visibility and engagement from the dissemination of project outcomes to partners, funders and social media. Immediate outcomes also include participants' empowerment and capacity building in communication and expression of their lived experience which is important for their personal growth and for future collective efforts.

7. Medium-term outcomes

Medium term outcomes represent the cascade effects of the project with time. In the Emantes's case study, these are creating a sense of belonging to community members and through the safe space of the activities and their digital storytelling outputs improve their levels of loneliness and low mental wellbeing. Indeed, population surveys before and after the interventions showed a marked improvement among the community members participating in several of the activities versus community members not participating in these activities. Other medium-term outcomes could include increased partner network and collaboration proposals.

8. Long-term outcomes

Long-term outcomes of this theory of change aims at creating meaningful shifts in the cultures of the society and institutions via increased representation in media alongside community empowerment and wellbeing. This will achieve greater representation and inclusion of the community members and greater willingness on their part to participate in dialogues about their wellbeing within institutions and the communities outside the Emantes safe space.

9. Impact

The last stage of the Theory of Change assumes many years (5+) of ongoing outputs which in the case of Emantes it translated to populating, diversifying and enriching mainstream media with narratives of the struggles and successes of LGBTQIA+ refugees and asylum seekers in Greece. Structural and cultural changes are expected to reshape institutional policies towards acceptance and inclusion of LGBTQIA+ refugees in decision making and their human resources. Ultimately, the desired impact is to improve the wellbeing of LGBTQIA+ refugees while also transforming societal and cultural norms.

8.4 Summary and Conclusion

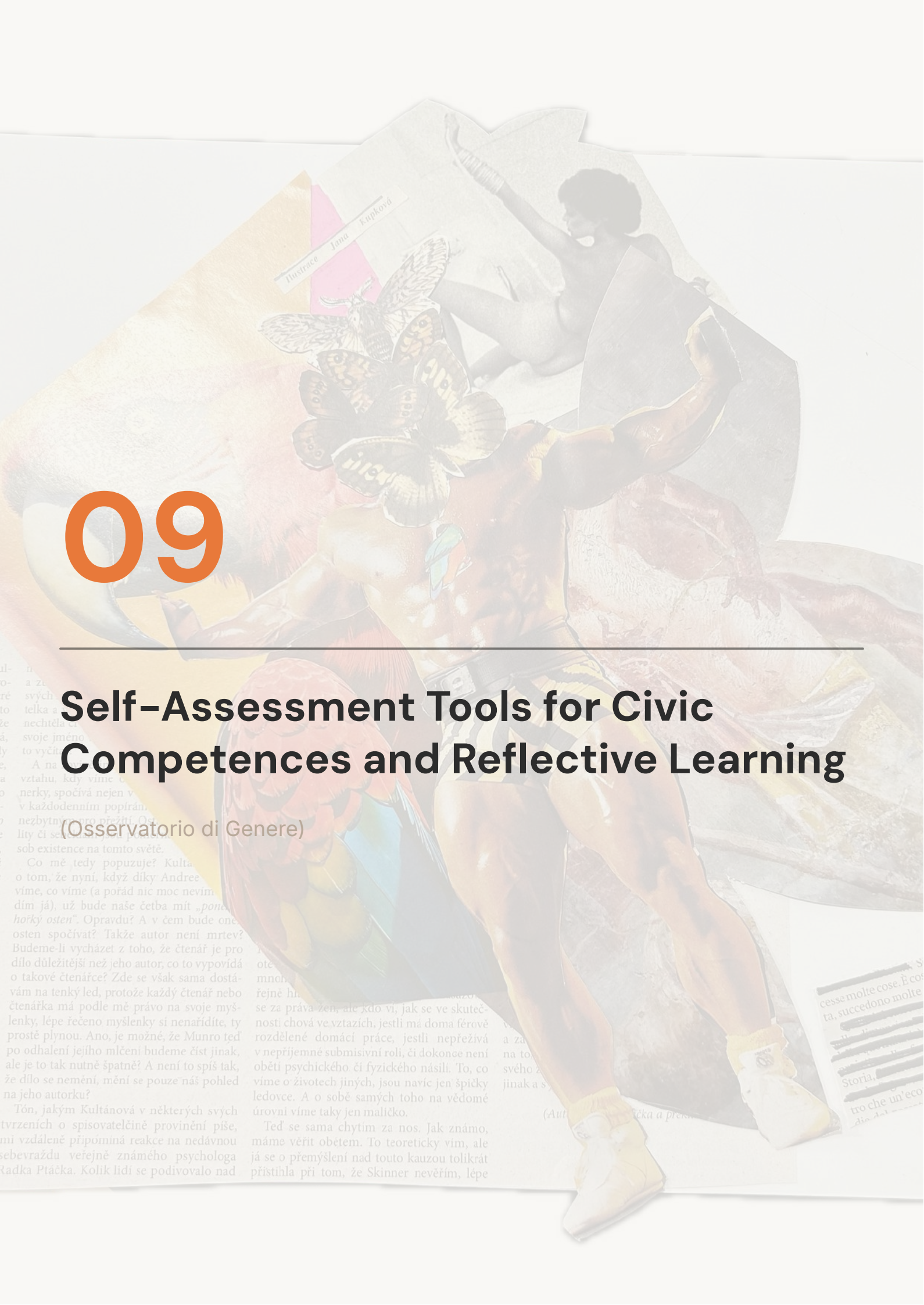
In conclusion, **digital storytelling integrated in a Collaborative Risk Governance framework extends beyond amplifying marginalised voices and their lived experiences; it's a powerful vehicle for social and cultural change.** It addresses issues of representation and participation while enhancing how institutions respond to the needs of LGBTQIA+ refugees. By adopting digital storytelling as a systematic approach to data collection, validation, analysis, and advocacy, there is the potential to reshape exclusionary narratives about the affected community and work towards more equitable outcomes in the future.

Creating a Theory of Change before designing a digital storytelling intervention is important to strategically plan for the resources and metrics necessary to implement and measure effect respectively. Theory of Change illustrates schematically and narratively the project to potential funders and partner organisations to support through funding and otherwise collaborations as well as creates accountability for the project and its outcomes.

Similarly, within the Our Story project, storytelling proves to be more than just a form of sharing LGBTQIA+ lived experiences in Europe. When integrated into participatory planning, reflective learning, and collaborative decision-making, it becomes a strategic tool for strengthening organisations, empowering communities, and driving sustainable social change. Thus, the Collaborative Risk Governance Framework serves not only as a planning resource but also as a reflection of the project's core values: participation, inclusion, shared responsibility, and continuous learning. These principles can be adapted to various international cooperation projects, community initiatives, and youth activities, extending the impact of the Our Story methodology far beyond the project's duration.

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09

Self-Assessment Tools for Civic Competences and Reflective Learning

(Osservatorio di Genere)

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svých
telka
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vztahu, kdy víme
nerky, spočívá nejen v
v každodenním popírání
nezbytný pro přežití. Ost
lity či se
sob existence na tomto světě.
Co mě tedy popuzuje? Kulta
o tom, že nyní, když díky Andree
víme, co víme (a pořád nic moc nevím
dím já), už bude naše četba mít „pono
hořký osten“. Opravdu? A v čem bude oně
osten spočívat? Takže autor není mrtev?
Budeme-li vycházet z toho, že čtenář je pro
dílo důležitější než jeho autor, co to vypovídá
o takové čtenářce? Zde se však sama dostá
vám na tenký led, protože každý čtenář nebo
čtenářka má podle mě právo na svoje myš
lenky, lépe řečeno myšlenky si nenařídíte, ty
prostě plynou. Ano, je možné, že Munro teď
po odhalení jejího mlčení budeme číst jinak,
ale je to tak nutné špatně? A není to spíš tak,
že dílo se nemění, mění se pouze náš pohled
na jeho autorku?

Tón, jakým Kultánová v některých svých
tvrzeních o spisovatelčině provinění píše,
mi vzdáleně připomíná reakce na nedávnou
sebevraždu veřejně známého psychologa
Radka Ptáčka. Kolik lidí se podívovalo nad

se za práva žen, ale kdo ví, jak se ve skuteč
nosti chová ve vztazích, jestli má doma férově
rozdělené domácí práce, jestli nepřežívá
v nepříjemné submisivní roli, či dokonce není
obětí psychického či fyzického násilí. To, co
víme o životech jiných, jsou navíc jen špičky
ledovce. A o sobě samých toho na vědomé
úrovni víme taky jen máličko.

Teď se sama chytím za nos. Jak známo,
máme věřit obětem. To teoreticky vim, ale
já se o přemýšlení nad touto kauzou tolikrát
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9.1 Introduction

This chapter examines how reflective practices in youth work can be intentionally designed to support competence development, self-assessment, and inclusive participation. Drawing on experiences from LGBTQIA+ and refugee youth work, it explores how reflection can transform lived experiences into recognised competences while remaining accessible across diverse groups.

The chapter brings together three examples that operate at different methodological levels.

Youthpass is a recognition and certification tool that helps participants name and communicate learning outcomes in a format that can travel beyond the project. **Walk-and-talk** is a facilitation technique that makes reflection less exposed and more embodied by combining movement, dialogue, and low-pressure sharing. The **Fishbone Diagram** is an analytical method that supports collective root-cause analysis of social problems. They are intentionally placed together because they show that reflection is not a single activity or format: it can support recognition, emotional processing, co-analysis, and civic action depending on how it is facilitated.

This methodological diversity is particularly important in LGBTQIA+ youth work. As discussed in Chapter 4, reflection requires safer and brave spaces where participants can share at different levels of exposure, disagree without being punished, and remain protected from avoidable harm. As discussed in Chapter 6, reflection is also embodied: people process experience not only through abstract discussion, but also through movement, artistic forms, sensory distance, and the use of mediating objects. The examples in this chapter should therefore be read as complementary tools for adapting reflective practice to different needs, contexts, and levels of readiness.

Within this framework, self-assessment is not understood as a final evaluative act, but as an ongoing process through which participants learn to recognise, articulate, and connect their experiences to personal, social, and civic competences.

The use of reflection in youth work with the LGBTQIA+ community

“One participant of the project stated that in their experience activism is usually a space where there are a ready answer and ready statements... for them this was the first time that they found the place where they felt part of change by asking collectively questions.”

For LGBTQIA+ youth, whose lived experiences are often marginalised or dismissed by formal institutions, structured reflection plays a key role in bridging the gap between experience and recognised competence. By providing a framework for meaning-making, reflection contributes to counteracting minority stress (Meyer, 2003) and supports a shift from deficit-based self-interpretations toward more balanced and resource-oriented understandings.

In this sense, reflection functions as a process of recognition. It enables participants to interpret their own trajectories, identify competences already present in their experiences, and position themselves as legitimate subjects of knowledge.

From a psychological perspective, this process is closely linked to the development of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Through guided reflection, participants move from "what I lack" to an understanding of what they can do, how they have acted, and what resources they can mobilise. This is particularly relevant in contexts where experiences are frequently framed through stigma or invisibilisation.

When facilitated in group settings, reflection also acquires a relational dimension. Sharing and comparing experiences supports processes of mutual recognition and contributes to the construction of shared meanings. This, in turn, can function as an entry point into forms of critical consciousness (Freire, 1970), where individual experiences are connected to broader social dynamics.

Such processes are further developed within participatory approaches such as Participatory Action Research (PAR), where reflection is embedded in iterative cycles linking experience, interpretation, and action. As illustrated in Chapter 7, reflective practices grounded in storytelling can evolve into collective spaces of co-analysis, where individual narratives are transformed into shared knowledge.

From a community psychology perspective, these processes contribute to community empowerment (Zimmerman, 2000), understood as the development of collective capacities to analyse and act upon social conditions. However, within the scope of youth work, the primary function of reflection remains the support of meaning-making, recognition, and perceived agency at the individual and relational level.

9.2 Methodological diversity to make reflective practices accessible to all

A "one-size-fits-all" approach fails marginalised youth. Accessible methodology must account for diverse neurotypes, varying communication styles, and different levels of emotional comfort. By mixing verbal, written, and artistic languages, we can ensure that reflection is accessible to all, moving beyond the limitations of direct verbal plenary sessions.

To ensure accessibility, reflection can be organised across different levels and formats, varying in terms of privacy, interaction, modes of expression, and degree of exposure.

At the individual level, participants can be invited to reflect privately through tools such as handwritten notes, drawing, or personal journaling. These low-threshold methods allow for slower processing, greater control over what is shared, and reduced performance pressure.

At the small group level, reflection can take place in pairs or small rotating groups (e.g. walk-and-talk activities - see paragraph 9.2.2), where participants can explore and test ideas in a more informal and less intimidating setting before sharing them more widely.

At the plenary level, structured and time-limited methods help ensure that all participants can contribute without requiring long or highly articulated interventions. Tools such as the "Tops and Tips" method support balanced feedback by inviting participants to identify both positive elements (tops) and areas for improvement (tips). This structure helps avoid purely critical or purely affirmative feedback, encouraging a more constructive and reflective dialogue. Symbolic approaches, such as the "Sea Metaphor" offer an alternative way to express experiences that may be difficult to articulate directly. In this method, participants map their reflections using shared imagery—for example, fears are represented as the sea, expectations as the sky, and personal contributions as boats. This visual and metaphorical framing allows participants to externalise emotions and experiences, making them easier to share and discuss collectively while maintaining a degree of psychological distance.

In addition, the use of mediating tools—referred to here as "third objects"—plays a key role in making reflective and feedback processes more accessible. These include creative or symbolic artefacts such as collages, fanzines, drawings, Dixit cards, or short written pieces, which participants can use to represent their experiences. By focusing on an external object rather than speaking directly about themselves, participants can engage with sensitive topics through greater psychological distance. This is particularly relevant for those who may find direct self-disclosure difficult or unsafe. As a participant of the project stated: "I could write the story not about myself, but about one of the artworks... having been able to externalise my experience and make it about somebody else—but like a third person—definitely, I think is safer for emotional topics".

The tools presented below are not equivalent in function, and this difference is intentional. A recognition tool such as Youthpass, an embodied facilitation technique such as walk-and-talk, and an analytical method such as the Fishbone Diagram each respond to a different question: How can learning be named and made visible? How can people reflect without excessive pressure or exposure? How can personal narratives be connected to structural causes and possible collective action? Taken together, they show how reflective practice can move between the individual, relational, and collective levels.

9.2.1 Example of practice: the Youthpass as a tool to transform critical reflection into visible skills

In order to position youth work as a meaningful space for civic and social learning, it is useful to adopt a shared language capable of making non-formal learning visible and transferable across contexts. Within the Erasmus+ framework, Youthpass represents a possible tool for this purpose, as it supports participants in identifying, articulating, and validating their learning outcomes through structured reflection processes. Rather than functioning as a formal assessment instrument, Youthpass is grounded in a learner-centred and self-reflective approach, where individuals actively construct meaning around their experiences.

The use of the 2018 Council Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning provides a complementary framework that enables the translation of experiential learning into widely recognised categories. These competences—including personal, social and learning to learn, citizenship, cultural awareness, and digital competence—offer a flexible structure through which participants can interpret their development without reducing it to standardized or purely cognitive outcomes.

What is Youthpass?

Youthpass is a recognition tool developed within the Erasmus+ and former Youth in Action programmes to make learning in non-formal contexts visible and communicable. Introduced in 2007, it takes the form of a certificate through which participants describe what they have learned during a project, with particular attention to competences developed through experience.

However, Youthpass is not simply a certificate issued at the end of an activity. Its core lies in a process of reflection and self-assessment that accompanies the entire learning journey. Participants are encouraged to continuously observe, interpret, and give meaning to their experiences, rather than reconstructing them retrospectively at the end of the project. In this sense, Youthpass functions as a pedagogical process before being a product.

At the centre of this process is self-assessment. Learners describe their own learning outcomes in their own words, with a high degree of autonomy, while facilitators provide support rather than evaluation. This approach reinforces ownership of learning and helps participants develop the ability to recognise and articulate their competences—an ability that is itself considered a key transferable skill.

The process typically unfolds in three interconnected dimensions. First, participants explore their experiences and identify what they have learned. Second, they relate these learnings to broader competence frameworks (such as the Key Competences), translating personal experiences into more widely understandable terms. Third, they articulate and document these competences in a way that can be communicated to others, for example in educational or professional contexts.

The resulting certificate therefore represents both an output and a trace of this reflective process. Beyond its documentary function, Youthpass supports self-awareness, strengthens confidence, and contributes to the social recognition of non-formal learning, while also offering a resource that participants can use when navigating further education or employment pathways.

9.2.2 Example of practice: walk-and-talk reflection as an embodied approach to low-pressure sharing

Reflection sessions—especially those involving personal narratives of LGBTQIA+ youth—can be cognitively and emotionally demanding. Traditional seated plenary formats may increase performance pressure or lead to the suppression of dissent. To address this, we implemented the walk-and-talk, an embodied reflection tool used midway through activity cycles or after significant milestones.

This approach is grounded in the idea that reflection is more effective when participants are able to articulate what happened and what it meant in an informal and less exposed setting. By combining movement with dialogue, the method shifts attention away from performance and toward process, enabling participants to engage in first-person, descriptive sharing rather than evaluative judgments.

How it works

The activity is typically structured through a sequence of paired or small-group walks along a predefined route. Facilitators provide a limited number of open-ended, practice-oriented prompts (e.g. "What challenges did you encounter while developing your activity?"), designed to encourage reflection on concrete experiences. Participants discuss each prompt for a short, fixed period (approximately five minutes), after which pairs rotate to allow for exposure to different perspectives. The full process usually lasts between 30 and 45 minutes and concludes with a brief plenary moment, where participants share selected insights or "takeaways" from their conversations.

In practice, this method tends to shift the tone of reflection from evaluative to descriptive. Participants use more concrete language ("what happened", "what I noticed") and fewer generalised judgments ("good/bad"). It is particularly effective for individuals who find solitary reflection difficult, as it enables them to process their thoughts through dialogue. The embodied dimension of walking also supports emotional regulation and helps maintain engagement throughout the activity.

9.2.3 Example of practice: the Fishbone Diagram as a reflective tool for analysing social injustice

In youth work contexts, reflection can extend beyond individual experience to support the analysis of structural inequalities. The Fishbone Diagram (Ishikawa diagram - see for example Pramusinta et al., 2025), is commonly used for root-cause analysis and can be adapted into a participatory reflective method for examining social injustice. In this chapter, it is included not only as a visual tool, but as a way to connect storytelling, co-analysis, and action planning.

Participants begin by identifying a concrete issue: for example, barriers to housing, employment, healthcare, legal recognition, or participation in community spaces, and position it as the "head" of the diagram. They then engage in a structured process of repeatedly asking "why?", mapping contributing factors along the "bones". These may include institutional policies, organisational practices, social norms, language barriers, economic conditions, legal status, family expectations, racism, transphobia, ableism, classism, or other intersecting forms of discrimination.

This process enables a shift from individualised explanations to multi-level analysis. Participants can see how personal experiences are situated within broader systems, rather than being interpreted as individual failure or lack of capacity. For LGBTQIA+ communities, and especially for people living at the intersection of multiple marginalisations, this reframing can be particularly important: it validates lived experience as knowledge and makes visible how different systems of power interact in concrete situations.

However, the Fishbone Diagram becomes part of Participatory Action Research (PAR) only when the analysis informs what happens next. If participants map root causes but the results remain only as a workshop output, the method is participatory but not necessarily action-research oriented. Within a PAR approach, the root-cause analysis produced through the Fishbone Diagram should feed directly into bottom-up strategic planning: it helps the community and the representing organisation decide which actions to prioritise, which alliances to build, which institutional barriers to address, and which forms of advocacy or service improvement are most relevant.

For this reason, the diagram can be used as a bridge between reflection and strategic planning for social change. The "bones" of the diagram do not only describe causes; they also indicate possible levers for change. For example, if barriers to healthcare are linked to lack of translation, fear of outing, and limited staff training, the following actions may include developing multilingual information, revising confidentiality protocols, or planning training with healthcare providers. In this way, the method connects participants' narratives to collective decision-making and future action.

This use of the Fishbone Diagram links directly to Chapter 8, where strategic planning through participatory methods is discussed in greater depth. Chapter 8 can therefore be used as a follow-up resource for facilitators who want to move from root-cause analysis toward Theory of Change, collaborative risk governance, and community-led planning.

As a reflective practice, the Fishbone Diagram contributes to civic competences by enabling participants to analyse social problems, distinguish between levels of causality, identify points of intervention, and articulate collective responses. Its value lies not only in making a problem visible, but in helping groups decide how to act on that analysis.

9.3 Micro-practices to increase the quality of feedback processes

Within this chapter, reflection has been framed as a participatory process through which lived experience is interpreted, recognised, and transformed into knowledge and competences. In this perspective, feedback is not a separate or final evaluative step, but an integral part of reflective practice: it is one of the key moments through which participants make sense of their experiences, recognise their resources, and connect individual insights to collective learning.

However, the quality of feedback processes is not neutral. It is shaped by relational dynamics, power asymmetries, and varying levels of exposure. In youth work contexts, feedback can occur across multiple directions: from participants to facilitators (e.g. evaluating an activity), from facilitators to participants (e.g. supporting learning and competence recognition), and among participants themselves (e.g. peer reflection). Each of these situations requires careful facilitation to ensure that feedback remains accessible, meaningful, and non-exclusionary.

For this reason, improving feedback processes does not depend only on the use of specific tools, but on how reflection is facilitated moment by moment. The following micro-practices can be applied across different stages of an activity—such as after a group exercise, during a debrief, or within peer-to-peer exchanges—to support more inclusive, reflective, and usable feedback. In line with the broader approach of this chapter, these practices aim to strengthen recognition, participation, and the development of agency through reflection.

Allow for silence to happen

Silence should be understood as an active methodological tool rather than a lack of participation. Allowing intentional pauses (e.g. a "10-second rule") creates space for participants—particularly those who are shy, marginalised, or processing in a non-linear way—to formulate their thoughts and decide whether and how to contribute. Structuring silence as part of the process therefore supports more equitable participation.

Normalize and create space for dissent

In group feedback situations, there is sometimes a tendency toward premature agreement. Facilitators can counter this by explicitly inviting alternative perspectives—for example, by asking "Did anyone experience this differently?" or "Is there something we might be missing?". This is particularly important when participants are asked to give feedback to facilitators or to evaluate a shared activity, where power dynamics may inhibit critical input. At the same time, this requires careful facilitation, as not all participants may feel equally safe expressing disagreement. When supported appropriately, legitimising dissent helps surface minority viewpoints, reduces pressure to conform, and strengthens the quality of collective reflection.

Support recognition of existing strengths

When facilitators provide feedback to participants, the aim is not to evaluate performance, but to support a process through which existing resources and competences can be recognised and articulated. Drawing on principles of Appreciative Inquiry (see for example Naude et al., 2014), this approach focuses on identifying what is already working in participants' actions and contributions—elements that are often implicit or invisibilised, particularly for those whose experiences are frequently framed in deficit terms. In practice, this involves grounding feedback in concrete observations and supporting participants in naming these elements themselves. Critical aspects can still be addressed, but they are more likely to be engaged with when participants feel recognised in what they already bring. In this sense, feedback becomes a process of recognition that supports a stronger sense of agency.

Manage pace and emotional load

Reflection and feedback processes—especially those involving personal narratives—can be cognitively and emotionally demanding. Facilitators need to actively manage pace by integrating breaks, informal moments, and opportunities for partial disengagement. This is particularly relevant after emotionally intense sharing or when multiple participants disclose personal experiences. Fieldwork experience shows that extended pauses allow participants to regulate their energy and re-engage with greater clarity. Also, it is important to provide enough time for reflection; as one participant stated it is important to have "plenty of time to reflect and bring order to the chaos".

Focus on observable behaviours

When giving feedback—either among participants or from facilitators to participants—it is more effective to refer to specific, observable behaviours rather than generalised or evaluative statements about the person. For example, saying "I noticed that you invited others to speak during the discussion" is more useful than "you are a good facilitator." By focusing on what was done, rather than who the person is, feedback becomes clearer, more usable, and more supportive of learning, while also preserving psychological safety within the group.

Promote the use of I-statements

While focusing on observable behaviours clarifies what is being referred to, using "I" statements (e.g. "I noticed...", "I found it helpful when...") clarifies from whose perspective the feedback is given. This helps ground feedback in personal observation and experience, rather than presenting it as an objective judgment. This approach is particularly useful in peer-to-peer exchanges, where feedback can easily become vague or personal. By anchoring statements in one's own perspective, participants can share their impressions more clearly while maintaining a respectful and non-threatening tone.

9.4 Conclusion

This chapter has examined how reflective practices in youth work can be intentionally structured to support competence development, recognition of learning, and inclusive participation. In contrast to approaches that treat reflection as a final evaluative step, the chapter has conceptualised reflection as an ongoing, participatory process through which lived experiences are interpreted, articulated, and connected to broader frameworks of knowledge.

Particular attention has been given to the role of reflection in contexts involving marginalised youth, where experiences are often delegitimised or rendered invisible. In these contexts, structured reflection contributes to the recognition of existing resources and competences, supporting the development of self-efficacy and enabling participants to position themselves as active subjects of their own learning processes. At the same time, when facilitated in group settings, reflection enables processes of mutual recognition and shared meaning-making, which can function as a basis for further collective analysis, including within participatory approaches such as Participatory Action Research.

The chapter has also highlighted the importance of methodological design in ensuring accessibility. The use of multiple formats, levels of exposure, and mediating tools allows reflective processes to accommodate diverse communication styles, cognitive preferences, and emotional needs. Practices such as embodied reflection (e.g. walk-and-talk), the use of symbolic artefacts, and structured feedback methods demonstrate how facilitation choices can directly influence participation and the quality of engagement.

Within this framework, feedback has been reframed as an integral component of reflection rather than a separate evaluative mechanism. The micro-practices presented illustrate how feedback processes can be structured to support participation, improve clarity of expression, and maintain psychological safety. In particular, approaches that emphasise observable behaviours, perspective-taking, and recognition of existing competences contribute to making feedback more actionable and less evaluative.

Finally, the integration of recognition frameworks such as Youthpass has been discussed as a means of making non-formal learning visible and transferable across contexts. However, the value of such tools lies not only in certification, but in the reflective processes they support. Self-assessment, when embedded within participatory and inclusive methodologies, constitutes a competence in itself, enabling individuals to recognise, articulate, and mobilise their learning.

The three examples presented in this chapter also show why reflective practice needs to be intentionally designed rather than treated as a generic debrief. Youthpass supports the recognition and communication of learning; walk-and-talk supports embodied, low-pressure reflection; and the Fishbone Diagram supports collective analysis and, when connected to planning, participatory action. Together, they demonstrate that self-assessment and reflective learning can move from personal meaning-making to civic competence development and, where appropriate, to community-led action for social change.

Overall, the chapter positions reflection as a pedagogical and relational practice that links individual meaning-making with processes of competence recognition and participation. While such processes may contribute to broader forms of collective awareness and action, their primary function within youth work remains the facilitation of learning, recognition, and the development of agency at the individual and relational level. As one participant of the project stated: "This was not just a project I participated in—this was my life. I didn't come here to improve my CV; I came to learn, grow, and meet people who helped me realize that I'm not alone".

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10

Learnings, Reflections and Policy Recommendations

(Fundació Catalunya Voluntària)



10 Learnings, Reflections and Policy Recommendations

This chapter brings together the key learnings, reflections and policy recommendations that emerge from the local activities carried out within the Our Story project across five countries: Spain, Slovakia, Italy, Greece and the Czech Republic. Together, five national organizations reached a diverse range of LGBTQIA+ participants, including young people, adults, refugees, asylum seekers, activists and educators, in a variety of community, institutional and cultural settings.

Below we are bringing together all these events with the objective of not just reporting on what we did, but demonstrating what it meant and what usage it has for the future.

10.1 Key Learnings from the Our Story Activities

The activities, from which we collected the reflections, learnings and recommendations were:

Storytelling through Theatre and Fanzine (Barcelona, 31 May 2025)

A four-hour workshop combining theatrical exercises, associative writing and collaborative zine-making, offering participants a space to transform personal experience into shared creative output.

Series of Dissemination Events (Barcelona, May 2025 – April 2026)

Monthly meetings with educators and local youth groups shared the project's findings on storytelling as a tool for inclusion, promoting the methodology beyond the project's direct participants.

Zine and Collage Workshop (Trnava, 24 May 2025)

Participants were introduced to the history and practice of zine-making and collage as storytelling tools, concluding with a collective sharing circle in which they presented their work and the meaning behind it.

Pixel Game Creation Workshop (Trnava, 18 July 2025)

Using the accessible Bitsy software, participants created short interactive pixel games built around personal stories and queer themes, discovering a low-cost digital storytelling format requiring no prior technical experience.

Community Dialogues, Event 1 (Monte San Giusto, 30 May 2025 and Ancona 12 June 2025)

An intergenerational dialogue session brought together local youth associations for collective storytelling and the co-creation of a zine inspired by the international training in Spain.

Community Meetings: Emantes (Athens, December 2024 – August 2025)

Four types of community activities for LGBTQIA+ refugees: film screenings, a photography workshop series, a symbolic storytelling session and a podcast series, offered multiple creative formats for sharing stories at each participant's own level of visibility.

Zine Workshop (Museum of Prague, 24 June 2025)

Facilitated by Our Story alumna MaritaKelbl, the session used emotional writing prompts and two-colour miniature zine-making to guide participants from identity exploration to visual storytelling and collective sharing.

Storytelling for Advocacy (Embassy of Belgium, Prague, 17 June 2025)

Facilitated by Lucia Zachariášová of Jsme fér and alumnus Ondřej Kaška, 16 participants learned to transform lived experience into structured advocacy pitches for political settings, with equal attention to emotional resilience and self-care.

Our Story– Storytelling for LGBTQ Community Wellbeing (Vilanova i la Geltrú, 22–28.11)

International training course establishing method, building a common language around gender and sexuality, co-creating the group's code of conduct and exploring the form of storytelling, with the photo project exposition at the end.

Our Story– Storytelling for LGBTQ Community Wellbeing (Prague 28.07.2025–04.08.2025)

International Training Course exploring the ways of telling the story, creative tools and aspects, personal and community reflections on LGBTQ Community Wellbeing, finished with collage and fanzine exposition.

One of the most striking findings across the five countries is the sheer diversity of forms that storytelling took. Each format was chosen in response to a different context and in different communities with different needs, each one working with the local LGBTQ youth, exploring the storytelling in its diverse forms with the NFE as a base. What united them was not the medium but the underlying logic: that giving people tools to tell their own story is an act of both empowerment and epistemic repair.

Bringing together these activities, we share the learnings, reflections and indications based on the thematic analysis of the inputs of coordinators, facilitators and participants of each of the activities and naming the most relevant and universal results. The detailed description of each of the local activities can be found on ourstory-community.eu

10.1.1 Non-verbal and artistic forms of expression open possibilities for LGBTQIA+ youth

A recurring observation across multiple activities is that non-verbal and artistic forms of expression generated particularly deep levels of engagement and self-reflection among LGBTQIA+ participants. We propose that this may be connected to the epistemic conditions that many queer young people navigate: individuals belonging to marginalised groups frequently experience forms of epistemic injustice in which their testimonies are granted less credibility and their capacity to articulate their own experience is undermined. The Our Story project experience shows that the non-verbal forms of expression result with more resistance to stigma and therefore, are recommendable in work with vulnerable people. The hypothesis for the reasoning behind requires deeper exploration, but the consistency with which it appeared internationally makes us certain it is important to mention.

10.1.2 Safe(r) spaces are constantly built

Across all five countries, the deliberate construction of a safe(r) space emerged as one of the most important preconditions for meaningful participation based on specific facilitation practices: icebreakers and teambuilders, clear agreements around confidentiality and consent, trauma-informed attention to the emotional weight that storytelling can carry, and the specific tools in case something is not right (for example, overstimulation or trigger). Safety can not be considered a stable achievement but a process that allows people to adapt and redefine the setting within the changing circumstances.

10.1.3 Kinds of spaces European queer youth is missing

A particularly important insight from the Spanish activity is that many LGBTQIA+ young people in Barcelona did not experience a general absence of queer spaces — but they did identify a specific absence: spaces oriented around creativity, reflection and community-building rather than socializing, dating or nightlife. We believe that this distinction is an important sign for youth organizations, cultural centers, etc. As long as community-based, daytime and creative spaces for LGBTQIA+ youth remain underdeveloped relative to nightlife venues, projects like this one serve a role of providing space for identity and community exploration, therefore, the important process of destigmatization and empowerment. Participants confirmed this themselves:

"The individualism of our society distances us from activities that create community. It is very important to stay united!"

10.1.4 Personal stories and political change

The Czech advocacy workshop demonstrated how thin the boundary between personal and political narrative is. When participants were given a structured methodology for transforming lived experience into advocacy, they became not only storytellers but potential agents of legislative change. This finding is consistent with narrative persuasion theory, which recognises that personal testimonies can influence political attitudes by fostering empathy and reducing the kind of abstract polarization that statistical arguments alone rarely overcome (Green & Brock, 2000).

10.1.5 Circulation of knowledge

Several local activities were co-developed and facilitated by people who had attended the international training courses as participants rather than trainers. This reflects the structure of how knowledge moves within the project. Rather than following a linear model, expertise flowing from institution to facilitator to participant, Our Story operates closer to what the Collaborative Risk Governance Framework describes as a bottom-up process of co-produced knowledge, in which lived experience is not the object of the methodology but one of its primary sources (Hadjigeorgiou et al., 2024).

When a participant returns to their own community and facilitates a local activity, they bring something no external trainer can replicate: the authority of having recently been on both sides of the experience. And because the methodology does not prescribe a fixed set of tools but invites each facilitator to adapt it to their own context and perspective, every iteration adds something that could not have been anticipated in advance. The result is not a replicable programme but a living community of practice—one in which knowledge circulates, is tested against lived reality, and returns enriched to the community that produced it. Future projects should treat this pathway as a structural commitment.

10.2 What Worked, What to Improve, and Why

10.2.1 What worked

Across all activities, the following approaches consistently proved effective:

- **Multimodal and low-threshold creative formats**
Whether zines, collage, photography, pixel games, film, or embodied theatre, activities that gave participants multiple ways of engaging - and that did not require prior artistic experience consistently produced high levels of engagement. Setting well the complexity, freedom of expression and restrictions within guidelines (like colour restrictions in Fanzine workshops) enable giving the tools of expression that encourage all, not just the ones with prior creative experience.
- **Gradual trust-building at the start of sessions**
Activities that invested time in warm-up exercises the pendulum in Barcelona, the back-to-back drawing in Prague, the informal post-screening discussions in Athens created conditions in which deeper sharing became possible later. This investment in relational groundwork was consistently reported as one of the most valuable structural elements.
- **Emotional writing prompts as a bridge between reflection and creation**
In both the Czech zine workshop and the Spanish session, guided emotional prompts ('I felt like X when Y') served as an effective transition between abstract self-reflection and visual or narrative output. Participants referred back to these prompts throughout the creative phase, suggesting that they functioned not merely as a part of the expressive process itself.
- **Peer sharing and collective reflection**
The closing circles at the end of the sessions (where participants voluntarily shared their creative work and reflected on the process) were consistently mentioned by the participants among the most valued moments. We believe that this is an important part of giving meaning to the experience. These sessions moved the experience from individual expression to collective recognition, which is, as the theoretical framework of this project affirms, where much of the transformative potential lies (Norris et al., 2008).
- **Institutional settings as symbolic amplifiers**
The Belgian Embassy in Prague provided not only a venue but a message, that LGBTQIA+ stories belong in diplomatic and political spaces. This symbolic dimension was noted by participants and facilitators alike as significantly enhancing the sense of legitimacy and agency in the room.

10.2.2 What to improve

The activities also revealed a number of areas that warrant attention in future iterations:

- **Reaching those who are not yet reached**

The most persistent challenge across countries was that activities tended to attract participants who were already connected to LGBTQIA+ communities and organisations and to a high extent already made a big part of their journey within the identity empowerment. The young people who would benefit most (those still navigating their identity in silence, without community support) were the hardest to reach. It reflects the structural difficulty of inviting participation from those who may not yet feel entitled to participate. Future activities must design explicitly for this group, with formats that are accessible without requiring prior self-identification, by, for example, less explicit yet still present LGBTQIA+ coding.

- **Closing sessions need more time and structure**

Across multiple activities some facilitators noted that closing moments were often too brief relative to the emotional depth of what had been shared. As mentioned before, these sessions have high relevance for the process and require a structured timeframe.

- **Technical complexity needs careful calibration**

The Bitsy game-making workshop in Slovakia demonstrated that the learning curve for new digital tools can significantly limit creative time, particularly when participants have varying levels of technical familiarity. Future workshops using digital platforms should either extend the time frame, offer preparatory resources, or sequence the technical introduction across multiple sessions. As mentioned before, we recommend low-threshold creative formats to focus mainly on the actual project objectives.

- **Intersectional facilitation of group dynamics**

As we mentioned before, creating safe(r) spaces is something processual. Within that, the facilitators have the role of ensuring the intersectional vision and conducting the group dynamic in a way that is aware of exclusion threats within the group and ensuring the same importance of voice for all. Taking of more space by the ones that can count on more privileged backgrounds and the ones who have a higher fluency in English language has to be continually corrected by the facilitators, by normalizing using tools to support language, actively encouraging the less active participants and using mixed tools for individual, small group and big group activities.

10.3 Policy Recommendations for Youth Work, Erasmus+ Structures and NGOs

The following recommendations emerge directly from the learnings described above. They are addressed to three distinct but overlapping audiences: youth workers and facilitators on the ground; organisations and NGOs working with LGBTQIA+ communities; and the institutional structures (including Erasmus+) that fund, shape and evaluate this kind of work.

10.3.1 For youth workers and facilitators

Design for the unreached, not only the connected

The effectiveness of any LGBTQIA+ youth activity should be measured not only by the quality of experience it offers to those who attend, but by how well it reaches those who do not yet know they could. This requires creative, low-threshold formats that do not require prior self-identification, and outreach strategies that go beyond existing community networks.

Treat emotional safety as a structural commitment

Safe(r) spaces are produced by a consistent set of practices - clear agreements, trauma-informed facilitation, structured warm-ups, explicit consent processes, dedicated closing rituals and most importantly, the openness to correct at any time of the activity - that must be built into the design of every session, not added afterwards.

Invest in peer facilitation

Activities facilitated by people with shared lived experience consistently generate deeper trust and stronger identification. Organisations should develop pathways for LGBTQIA+ young people who have participated in activities to become facilitators of future ones as demonstrated by the alumni-led workshops in Prague or Athens. This is also a form of empowerment in itself.

Allow storytelling to be non-verbal

Not all stories are told in words, and not all people can or wish to tell their stories verbally. Artistic, embodied and visual methodologies are forms of storytelling that may be particularly well-suited to communities whose verbal expression has been historically delegitimised. Youth workers should develop fluency in a range of creative methodologies, not as supplementary tools but as primary ones.

10.3.2 For NGOs and community organisations

Build continuity into your programmes

The most transformative outcomes of this kind of work are rarely visible after a single session. Trust, community, and the capacity for self-expression are slow-growing. Organisations should seek funding and develop programming that allows communities to return to storytelling practices over time, building on what was created before rather than beginning again.

Collaborate with professional artists and storytellers

The inclusion of professional queer artists in community-based activities creates a qualitatively different experience, offering participants not only tools but horizons. This kind of collaboration requires specific budgeting and partnership development, but the evidence from the field and from research suggests it is among the highest-yield investments available (Lawton & Cain, 2022).

Document with care and consent

The stories generated within these activities are people's lives. Organisations must develop robust, transparent and truly voluntary consent processes for the documentation and dissemination of storytelling outputs. Participants should understand exactly how their words, images and voices will be used, and should retain the right to withdraw that consent at any point. This is particularly important when working with communities — such as LGBTQIA+ refugees — for whom visibility carries real and immediate risks.

Adapt the methodology for other marginalised groups

The participatory storytelling approaches developed within this project are not exclusive to LGBTQIA+ communities. The underlying apply wherever epistemic injustice has silenced lived experience. Organisations should explore how these tools can be adapted for use with other minority groups, in dialogue with those communities and grounded in their own realities.

10.3.3 For Erasmus+ structures and funders

The current structure of many Erasmus+ projects rewards the production of tangible deliverables within defined time frames. This is often misaligned with the slow, relational nature of community-based storytelling work, where the most important outcomes (a sense of recognition, a shift in self-perception, the formation of lasting connections) are not easily captured in mobility reports or dissemination statistics. We call on Erasmus+ and similar funding structures to develop evaluation frameworks that can hold qualitative, long-term and relational impact alongside quantitative outputs and understand the continuation of the projects from this perspective.

Encourage transnational partnership models that hold diversity

The partnership model of Our Stor —five organisations from five countries, each with different expertise, different communities and different political contexts—produced a richness of methodology and perspective that no single organisation could have generated alone. Erasmus+ should continue to incentivise this kind of diversity in partnership composition, and should create space within project structures for genuine co-creation rather than the division of pre-assigned tasks.

Recognise narrative evidence as legitimate project evaluation data

The most significant outcomes of storytelling-based work—a shift in self-perception, the formation of a lasting connection, the moment a young person finds language for an experience they had never been able to name - are rarely captured by attendance figures or mobility statistics. Erasmus+ evaluation frameworks should formally recognise participant narratives, facilitator observations and qualitative community feedback as primary evidence of impact.

Require equity impact assessments in project design

Organisations applying for Erasmus+ funding for LGBTQIA+ or minority-focused work should be supported to demonstrate how their project design actively reaches those most marginalised within the target community, not only those most easily reached. Funding criteria should reward genuine inclusivity and intersectional perspective of the project design.

10.4 Future directions for queer storytelling in Europe projects

Our Story has shown us that queer storytelling in the European context is not a niche practice. It is a political and relational necessity. The experiences shared across our five countries — the vulnerability, the creativity, the resistance — revealed a community that is vast and diverse, and that is hungry for spaces where it can speak and be heard without having to justify its existence. That hunger does not disappear when a project ends. If anything, it grows.

This is why we believe that the future of queer storytelling in European projects cannot be thought of in terms of replication alone. It is not enough to reproduce these tools and apply them elsewhere, as if the work were a recipe to be followed. What we have built is not a formula. It is a practice — and like all practices, it demands to be continued, deepened, questioned and transformed.

With this in mind, we see several directions that feel both necessary and urgent.

10.4.1 Reaching the young people who are still finding their way.

One of the most persistent challenges we encountered throughout the project —and named explicitly in our learnings— is that our activities do not always reach those who would benefit from them most. It is telling that for many LGBTQIA+ young people, the spaces where they first discover and express their identity are not community centres, youth projects or educational settings, but nightclubs and party spaces. This is not a coincidence: it reflects both the historical role that queer nightlife has played as a refuge from hostility, and the continued absence of daytime, sober, accessible community spaces that welcome young people before they have already found the language for who they are. As long as this gap persists, we risk creating projects that empower the already empowered, while leaving behind those who are still in silence.

Future initiatives must be designed with this in mind: not only in terms of outreach, but in terms of the nature of the invitation itself. Creative, community-based and participatory activities: zine-making, collage, movement, collaborative storytelling do not require a young person to already know their identity in order to participate. They offer an invitation to explore, to play, and to encounter themselves and others, without the pressure of declaration. Research confirms that arts-based and creative group work can be particularly effective in supporting LGBTQIA+ young people precisely because it allows identity to be approached through making, rather than naming (Gates & Hughes, 2023; Halverson, 2010).

10.4.2 Building a digital space.

The project has already begun to establish the foundations of a digital community platform, and we believe this direction is one of the most important to continue and deepen. A digital space built on the values co-created through two years of transnational is a space that can carry the relational logic of the project forward: enabling ongoing exchange, offering a point of connection for young people who are isolated in their local contexts, and ensuring that the stories generated within our activities continue to circulate and find new audiences. The same principles that govern our in-person facilitation must be legible in its methodology and culture. Digital inclusion also means attending to the barriers that prevent some communities from accessing and contributing to online spaces: language, connectivity, digital literacy, and the fear of visibility in contexts where being out carries real risks.

10.4.3 Extending storytelling as a methodology to other marginalised communities.

The methodology proposed in Our Story from the beginning was designed as a tool to give voice to unexpressed or silenced experiences. Although each context needs a thoughtful adaptation, the core proposal of the project is and should be shared to support other communities too. The conviction at the heart of this project —that giving people the tools to tell their own stories, is an act of empowerment and a counter to epistemic injustice— does not belong exclusively to the LGBTQIA+ community, but to every community that has been told that its experiences don't count.

We therefore see the methodology developed within Our Story as a transferable resource rather than a fixed programme. Its principles —participation, co-creation, artistic accessibility, care for emotional safety, attention to power and language— can and should be adapted to support other groups that face marginalisation: communities racialised as minorities, people with disabilities, migrants and refugees, people experiencing poverty. In each case, the work would need to be done with and not for those communities, developed from within their own realities, in dialogue with their own forms of expression. But the foundations we have built together offer a starting point for those conversations.

10.4.4 The importance of sustained, long-term commitment.

The goals like the ones set in Our Story project cannot be done only in the short time frames. Shaping the identity, belonging and trust are slow processes. They require the cultivation of relationships over time, between participants and facilitators, organisations and communities, the method and mindset itself and the wider context in which it is situated.

Future European projects in this area should therefore invest in continuity: in partnerships that outlast funding cycles, in formats that allow communities to build on their own work over multiple years, and in the recognition that the most important outcomes of this kind of project are the hardest to measure.

As Bell Hooks reminds, the margin is not only a site of deprivation; it is also the site of radical possibility (Hooks, 1990). We believe that the continuity and persistence in giving the voice to silenced groups is a way to pursue building more just and human Europe.

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