The Power of Storytelling
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Storytelling is powerful and there are several reasons for that. One important aspect is that telling stories is a natural process and each of us does it all the time. Whenever we communicate, we tell stories. We do so to make ourselves understood, but also to process our experiences, to digest them and integrate them into a meaningful whole. The reflection that is ingrained in this process might be one reason for the attractiveness of the method. Reflection is certainly something that is especially relevant for storytelling. Another aspect that makes storytelling a powerful tool is that it is a very egalitarian method. Everybody can do it and sometimes even people who have low self-esteem for various reasons (e.g. postcolonial trauma or perception of hierarchy) feel attracted by storytelling as a simple and natural means of communicating their views and experiences. Once you put people in the right mood and one person starts to remember special moments in his/her life, the enjoyment is almost guaranteed. Listening to each other’s condensed experiences creates a special atmosphere. In this positive environment people are
willing to share and reflect. As we all know from learning theory, creating such an environment is a key element of learning. Stories are much easier to remember than facts and figures. Stories speak for themselves, and each learner can get out of it whatever is relevant to them and links to their personal experiences and needs. This is one reason why it makes a lot of sense to use storytelling for uniting individual in community.

**Storytelling as community building**

Every culture has its tradition of storytelling and it can be a very useful approach to also work with the stories, myths and tales of different cultures to make people aware of the hidden values and beliefs. Stories have been used for centuries as a means of teaching values. When we want to encourage people to get a better understanding of cultural diversity and help them to live with these differences, we will always come back to discussing values and value systems. Values serve as landmarks and give orientation in our everyday behavior. Talking about values is not an easy thing. Stories can help us to give life to these abstract concepts that – often subconsciously – guide us. However, when we talk about storytelling as a method or tool, we don’t mean working with given stories. The stories we champion are based on real-life events, situations that someone really went through and can talk about. We want to encourage people to find these stories and make use of them. Let’s
go back to the common experience of storytelling and how we can build on it when working within a community and utilizing intercultural storytelling. When talking about culture, there is a general tendency to stress differences and the uniqueness of each culture.

We need to talk about the differences, but this is much easier in an atmosphere that allows similarities to be appreciated. People who share their stories will feel the uniting effect that stories have.

Creating a feeling of familiarity facilitates the flourishing of openness towards working with the differences.

When people listen to each other’s story, they share the experience and connect to the storyteller. The effect might not be as strong as if they had gone through this experience together, but still, a story is the revival of a situation experienced in a different context. However, not only the storyteller will revisit his or her experience – also the listeners will be stimulated to return to their own experiences. Storytellers and listeners will always find similarities and connections – and this makes them feel enthralled. Storytelling activates our emotional memory. It is not only the storyteller getting emotional when talking about this experience, but also the listener – as there is always a linkage between the two stories. Common
experiences can be found in every story and are a great means of building trust in intercultural groups.

Why is the process of storytelling so appealing?

In order to answer this question, we have to look at both sides for further explanation: on one hand the person who tells a story and on the other hand the person who is listening. If we start with the listener, we realize that this person is not only listening to the story he/she is being told, but develops pictures of the story’s scenes in his/her mind. These pictures can never be the same as the ones of the storyteller, but the listener is taking on an active part in co-creating the story. By doing so, he or she finds connections to their own life and history and automatically reflects how they would have resolved the situation or reacted to it. This is why in storytelling the listener learns as much as the storyteller. The storyteller fulfills a more active role. He or she accesses their personal database of experiences and makes a choice by deciding what he/she wants to talk about. The story is of course never a mirror image of reality, as the storyteller decides – consciously or subconsciously – what to tell and what to leave out. This choice gives him/her a feeling of power, of being in charge of reality. This may sound negative, but in fact is not, as this is a process taking place all the time. This feeling of being in charge and being able to face reality is also an extremely important aspect of intercultural
storytelling. The situations experienced in different cultural settings can be very confusing and people often have the feeling of being lost – not only lost in translation, but also lost in reality. By telling a story again people have the chance to sort it out, to put it into an order that works for them. Moreover, if someone has a person listening to them while telling the story, it makes them feel good, in power, in control. In simple terms, it is this psychological process that allows storytelling to work as a way of connection and appreciation.