

Guidelines for Sharing and Discussing Narratives and for Moderating NBM Group Sessions

Maintaining personal and professional boundaries in reflective writing groups is essential to all models of teaching Narrative-based Medicine.

All members should ensure safety, confidentiality and respect within the large and breakout groups, both during and outside the group sessions. Stories about patients, learners, colleagues must be honoured, respected and not shared beyond the learning setting.

In particular, the ethics of writing and publishing about patients and their ownership of their unique illness narratives is emphasized throughout teaching at the Narrative-based Medicine Lab :

[Ethics-of-Writing-about-Practice-Resources-Sept-2023.pdf](#)

Please refer to The NBM Safety and Courage Guidelines at:

[Resources – Narrative-Based Medicine](#)

Here are some ground rules for moderating large group and breakout writing discussions, either virtually or in person:

- 1) Group members may have questions/comments about the story shared, but the reader is not obliged to respond to any of them. Group participants must be reminded to discuss what the story provides. Examples of phrasing can include: "This story brought up [thoughts, feelings, memories, images etc.] of [emotion, sensation, etc.] for me..." or "This story made me curious to know more about..."

If a group member becomes intrusive or personally focused in their questions or comments, the moderator should say, "Let's stick/stay with the text." or "Let's return to the story we've been given, as it was written."

- 2) Receiving stories that are read aloud is an act of ACTIVE LISTENING.

Invite group members to identify STRENGTHS in the piece.

If appropriate, potential FEEDBACK/EDITS/REQUESTS FOR CLARIFICATIONS can be provided that might strengthen the story. POSSIBILITIES of where the story might go if the author wishes to spend more time on it, can also be elicited.

Feedback should be respectful, constructive and never personal or confrontational. The author should not be asked to justify their choices in the piece or to answer questions that emerged in the discussion, unless they wish to do so.

Again, the story is always in the hands of the teller and it's up to them to reply to any feedback provided or not.

- 3) It is important to maintain confidentiality and respect around what participants choose to share. This means not repeating things told by participants outside of the course/workshop. Any extraneous details about a participant's narrative that group members may be aware of from professional/clinical/educational contexts outside of the course itself, should not be divulged.

- 4) Consider asking the reader to remain silent until all the group feedback has been provided and then invite them back in.
If constructive feedback or suggestions have been offered, the moderator can then ask, "How is this feedback sounding to you?".
Again, the author/reader decides if and how they wish to respond.
Inviting feedback on feedback is another way of keeping the group receptive and accountable.
- 5) Don't assume that the narrator of the piece is the author who is reading it.
When making comments say, "The narrator does X in that part of the story" rather than "YOU did X", to enforce that distinction.
- 6) Remind participants that the writing group is not a therapy group and that stories shared in a collegial context cannot be untold. Listeners should not provide personal or clinical advice to the reader and should be reminded repeatedly to "stick/stay with the text".
- 7) Timekeeping is another way to manage boundaries. Decide within the large group how many stories will be shared in the session and how much time is allotted for each. In breakout groups, a timekeeper can also ensure that everyone has a chance to read, contribute or provide feedback.
Be firm about moving to the next story or comment. Be clear about how you will indicate when a group member's time is up.
Ask - "Who hasn't had a chance to share their narrative/ feedback yet?" Encourage everyone to share at least once in the breakout sessions.
Some readers may become emotional (e.g. tearful/angry/hesitant) when sharing their story.
Ask the reader if they "need a minute", whether they would like to stop sharing or pick up later, as the last reader of the session.
Similarly, listeners may become moved (e.g. angry/tearful/argumentative) upon hearing a story.
Ask them, "What are you noticing in this story that has moved you in this way?".
"How does this text work in invoking such strong reactions?"
Don't confront the author about their political/clinical/controversial views as displayed in the narrative. Stay with the story provided and discuss how the story works as a piece of writing.
Invite the listener with strong reactions to stay curious about that response and to potentially write /share their own story next time.
- 8) Take turns being the moderator or timekeeper within sessions and breakout groups and try to apply the above rules in real time.
You can then take that experience back to your own educational setting and thereby model an appropriate approach to the maintenance of professional boundaries in narrative-based teaching sessions.