



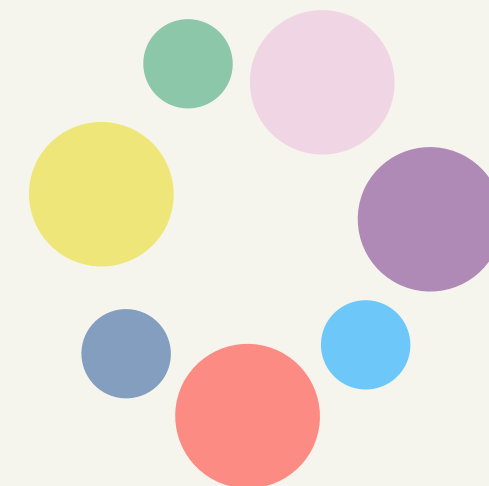
# Using Narrative Expression exercises to develop Distributed Leadership:

A Guide

ENABLES Erasmus + Project

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## The ENABLES project and what this guide is about

The ENABLES project aims to increase and strengthen distributed leadership in schools by using innovative methods of arts-based and embodied methods of leadership development which we have trialled. The Romanian ENABLES team used a series of narrative expression exercises as the expressive activity in their online workshops.

In this guide we explain what narrative expression exercises are, why we used them and how they can be used by anyone who is interested in developing distributed leadership through arts-based and embodied methods. We'll share examples of narrative expression exercises used with our workshop participants. We finish by sharing a few ideas about what you might like to consider when planning to lead an activity using narrative expression exercises.



## How can narrative expression exercises be used to help develop distributed leadership?

Arts-based methods like narrative expression exercises can help people express things about themselves, their professional roles and their values and beliefs in a way that just talking sometimes cannot. Narrative expression exercises also support people to think differently, too. For some of our participants, writing creatively and expressively and sharing meaning with others were really useful ways to reflect on how they view leadership.

Participants in our workshops shared what they felt they had learned and those findings can be summarised into three main areas:

- personal development
- professional development (improving teaching strategies and ways of reflecting on educational practice) and
- leadership capabilities.

Participants reported that the workshops had helped them to increase capacity for self-knowledge and inter-knowledge, to identify common fears and joys (professionally speaking) as well as personal and professional values, to diminish fears about sharing their own feelings (increasing capabilities for co-operation and collaboration) and to increase expressive skills. These areas of impact support participants' ability to engage in leadership as a collective and interactive process involving teachers and students as well as senior leaders.



## Before we move on, what is narrative expression and what are narrative expression exercises?

Narrative expression is a relational process of identity development that involves identifying authentic personal preferences and desired expressions of experience. It takes place in a group. The process involves people engaging in storytelling within the group and further enriching those stories through group members' reflections on their identity.

Narrative expression exercises are specific activities that stimulate the process of narrative expression. The techniques are part of what we call a narrative methodology. We outline here two of the techniques which were used with participants in our online workshops.

### Something Meritorious

- an exercise in pairs which aims to engage and inspire participants to get in touch with narrative ideas and to tap into their own personal narrative resources and skills

### The Tree of Life

- an interactive narrative exercise which allows the telling, retelling and re-retelling of stories using writing, drawing and storytelling, and documenting intentional identity descriptions related to alternative desirable personal stories of identity, relationships, and life.



## What other narrative expression exercises are there?

We outline here three more of the techniques which were used with participants in our online workshops.

### Definitional Ceremony

- a group storytelling exercise which provides people with the option of telling or performing the stories of their lives before an audience of carefully chosen outsider witnesses, to allow the group to appreciate the effects of participation in this workshop.

### Care for those who care

- an exercise which proposes a set of questions as a possible map for narrative conversations, which starts with the question of who takes care of those who take care of others

### Magical Day

- an activity in which people are invited to think of a desired place or time, as if it were a magical day. The activity involves a series of scaffolded questions and explores aspects of (professional) identity.



## Why were narrative expression exercises used in the ENABLES workshops?

A range of narrative expression exercises have emerged from the premise that we are all narrative beings and we all have story-telling skills. The exercises used in the ENABLES workshops were designed and led by an expert facilitator who has wide ranging experience of devising and leading such activities.

The activities used in the workshops all draw on the principles of narrative theory and are ideas rooted in narrative therapy practice. They are an opportunity for people to work in pairs, or groups, and to engage in a communal experience. With skilful facilitation and within a safe and trusting environment, activities such as the Tree of Life, or Something Meritorious, have the potential to establish connections with each other and identify common or similar hopes and dreams.

Participants in the ENABLES workshops were offered the opportunity to establish a sense of interconnection and transparency with each other and to “warm up” an emerging relationship with people they knew previously or people they did not yet know.

The activities offer different ways of making sense of the narrative process, and to reflect on aspects of personal and professional identities and histories. Narrative expression has the potential to help people develop and strengthen distributed leadership.



## How were narrative expression exercises used in the ENABLES workshops?

The design of the workshops was underpinned by a number of key principles:

- a place where people can share and celebrate what they have learned
- an approach which puts the learner at the centre
- an evidence-informed approach which embeds the known benefits of narrative expression
- a space for adult learning
- an understanding that leadership is distributed

The workshops included an introduction to the ENABLES project and an overview of the workshop session itself. A range of narrative expression exercises were built into the workshops, which lasted 2 hours or longer.





## How were narrative expression exercises used in the ENABLES workshops?

The workshops trialled the use of a range of narrative exercises, including one specifically designed to support participants in their reflections. The facilitator of these activities has considerable experience in leading workshops and activities of this kind.

The two main exercises used in the workshops were:

1. **Something Meritorious** – an exercise, in pairs, to engage and inspire participants to get in touch with narrative ideas  
and
2. **Tree of Life** – a scaffolded and guided activity to encourage participants to explore their identities, relationships and professional life.

Other exercises in the workshops included **Care for Those who Care** and **Magical Day**. The **Definitional Ceremony** method was also used as a reflective tool which allowed participants to appreciate the effects of their participation in the workshop.



## Something Meritorious: a narrative expression exercise

Something Meritorious is a relatively new narrative approach, emerging from narrative psychology. It is an exercise in pairs, which aims to engage and inspire participants to get in touch with narrative ideas and to tap into their own personal narrative resources and skills. It allows an unravelling of the everyday stories we tell ourselves in our personal and professional lives.

The exercise has five stages:

1. Pair up with another person
2. Each partner has 3 minutes to share something about themselves that they consider worth telling
3. Each partner takes a couple of minutes to write down something important and of merit about the other person, from what they have just shared – something remarkable that deserves to be shared and known and learned by others

*What struck your attention? What touched your imagination?*

4. Each partner takes a couple of minutes to read out what they have written down

*Why were you attracted to particular aspects of this person's story?*

5. Invitation to share with a wider group what has been learned and discovered from this exercise



## Something Meritorious: a narrative expression exercise

On the ENABLES website, you will find a short video outlining the Something Meritorious exercise, and how it can be used in workshops to develop capacity for distributed leadership.

Something Meritorious provides a conversational context for people to share experiences of their personal and/or professional life freely with each other and works with people who know each other and those meeting for the first time.

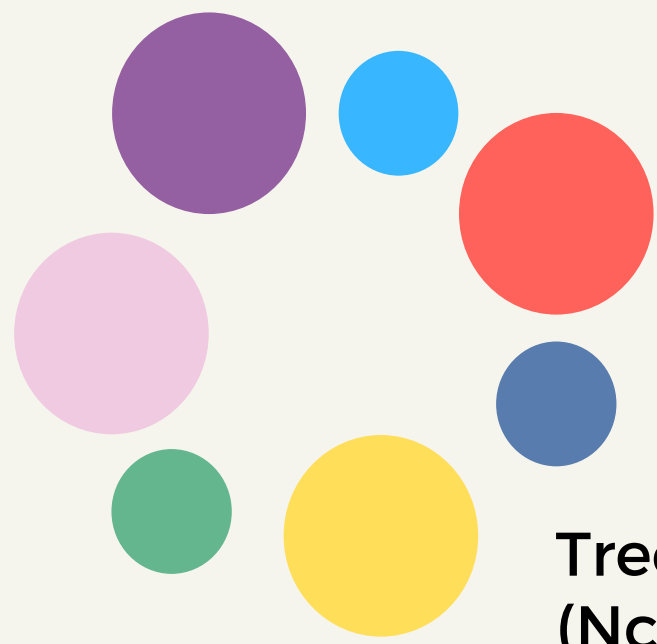
The facilitator should seek to establish a safe and trusting environment for this exercise and guide people skilfully and sensitively through the process.

### Key practical points:

- Set aside about 15 minutes for the exercise
- People need to be able to work in pairs
- It can work well even with large groups of people

Something Meritorious

<https://youtu.be/xbltrSuxixc>



## Tree of Life: a narrative expression exercise

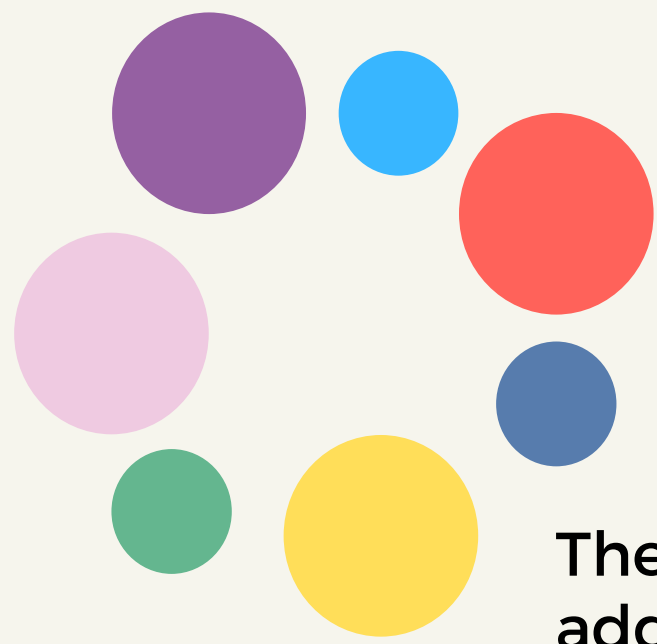
Tree of Life is an interactive and collective narrative exercise emerging from narrative therapy practice (Ncube, 2006) which allows the telling, retelling and re-retelling of stories. It uses writing, drawing and storytelling, and supports the creation of intentional identity descriptions related to alternative desirable personal stories of identity, relationships, and personal and/or professional life.

The Tree of Life exercise is underpinned by principles of rich story development (Gavrilovici & Dronic, 2020); the narrative facilitation of the exercise is based on genuine curiosity and respect from a decentered but influential position (White, 2007).

The Tree of Life practice comprises four guided and scaffolded stages:

1. Tree of Life: drawing and labelling a tree, for initial individual story telling
2. Forest of Life: exhibiting individual trees together and inviting visitors to browse and respond to trees in the forest
3. Storms of Life and Responses: used to work through particular difficulties
4. Certificates: an opportunity to celebrate and capture important aspects of stories, identities, skills, values and relationships throughout life.

The ENABLES workshops incorporated stages 1, 2 and 4.



## Tree of Life: a narrative expression exercise

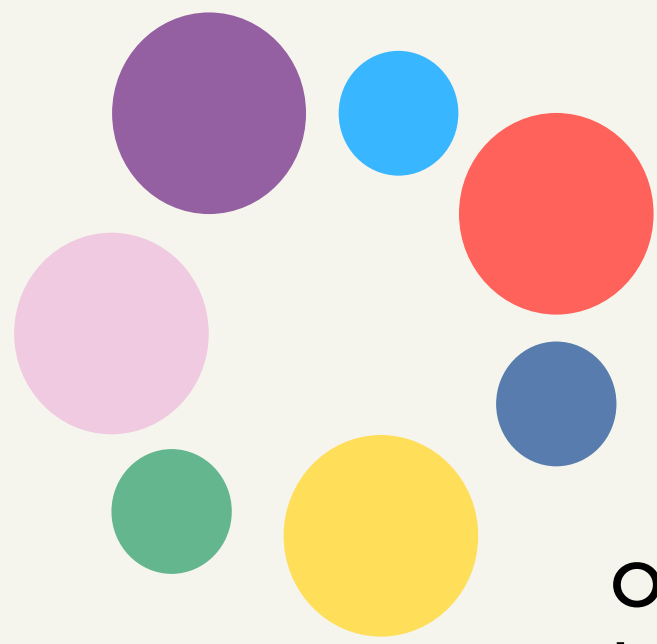
The Tree of Life stage itself consists of six components. The facilitator guides the workshop participants to add these interconnected components to their Tree of Life:

- **Roots** - places they were born and where they have lived until now; family history, legends, myths, origins; favourite places or objects; very influential persons in childhood and adolescence; preferred music, dance, activities, etc.
- **Ground line** - actual or current place where they live; regular activities and hobbies.
- **Trunk** - important values; demonstrated skills – that the person or others have proof of; valued characteristics or qualities; engagements with a certain purpose, purposes or commitments.
- **Branches** - personal hopes, dreams, wishes, directions in life.
- **Leaves** - people who are important and valued (living or not), people they have met in their lives and people or characters (historical figures, musicians, authors, etc.) that matter to them, influencing their lives;
- **Fruits** - “gifts”, “legacies”, especially relational contributions in their lives by important others (like being cared for).

(Gavrilovici & Dronic, 2020, p.6)

Tree of Life

<https://youtu.be/p1VTKT6vYEU>



## Tree of Life: a narrative expression exercise

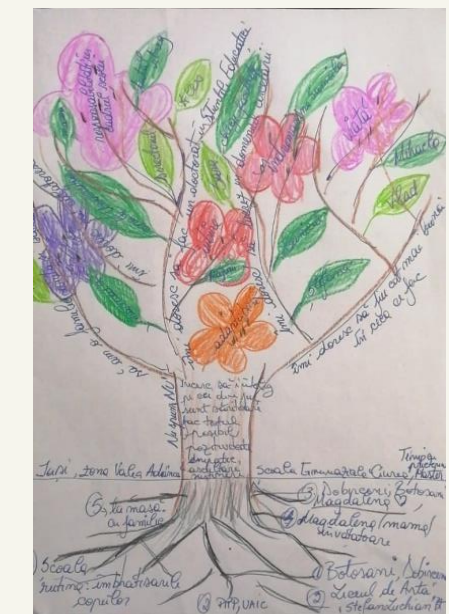
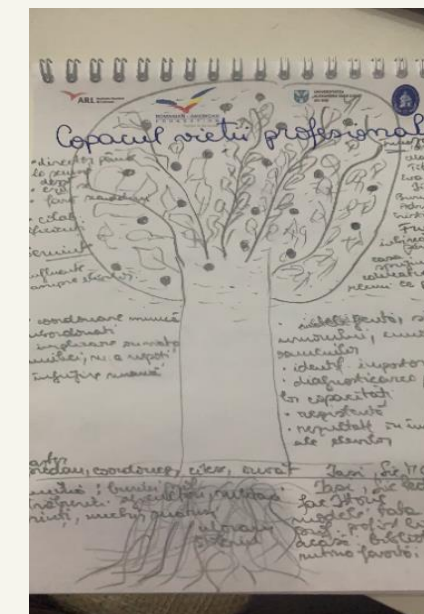
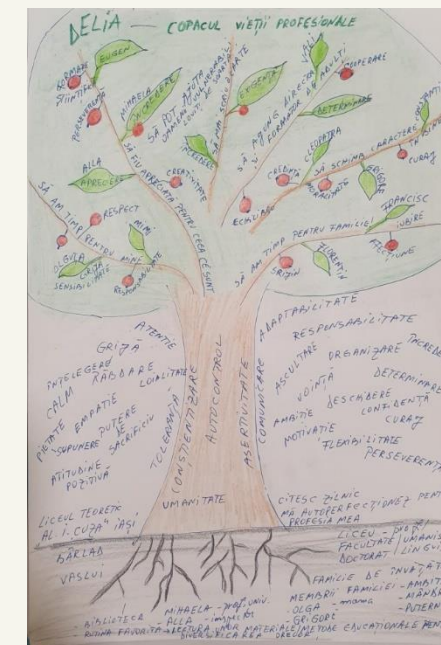
On the ENABLES website, you will find a 15-minute video outlining the Tree of Life exercise, and how it can be used in workshops to develop capacity for distributed leadership.

### Tree of Life

<https://youtu.be/p1VTKT6vYEU>

*“The tree of life was one of the exercises that surprised me and that I did with great emotions. I realised that many of the special people in my life are now far away from me. Maybe I lost touch with some of them, maybe some went to a better place, but that doesn't stop me from considering them special. I reconnected with some of them after the workshop, so I can only be glad that I reconnected with loved ones.”*

*Workshop participant*





## Definitional Ceremony: a narrative expression exercise

The Definitional Ceremony is a group narrative practice emerging from narrative therapy practice. It provides people with the option of telling or performing the stories of their lives before an audience of carefully chosen outsider witnesses (White, 2007), to allow the group to appreciate the effects of participation in this workshop.

The Definitional Ceremony acts as a context for enriching people's identities, relationships and lives. It is based on post-structuralist notions of identity expression in which identity formation is a public and social event influenced by historical and cultural forces. This way of thinking about identity formation depends on obtaining a sense of authenticity which is a result of the social processes of identifying and validating preferred expressions of identity and personal history.

The actual process of engaging in the Definitional Ceremony has been found to 'move' or 'transport' participants; it gives them the opportunity to choose to become different than they were at the beginning of the workshop, to find themselves in a different place as a result of the experiences they have participated in.

In the ENABLES workshops, the Definitional Ceremony exercise was used primarily as a reflective tool which allowed participants to appreciate the effects of their participation in the workshop.



## Definitional Ceremony: a narrative expression exercise

The main characteristics of the Definitional Ceremony (DC) are:

- It is envisaged as a final 'event' to celebrate learning and transformation; the DC 'arena' supports the formation of a narrative identity which is relational and experiential (in this case the experience of learning through participating in the workshop).
- A participant chooses to tell the story of their lives, in the centre of the DC, in front of an 'outsider witness' audience.
- The outsider witnesses (which can be one or more people) respond to the expressions in the story of that person, retelling certain aspects heard.
- Outsider witnesses are not allowed to express personal opinions or make evaluative statements; they respond to what they have heard and interact with other witnesses, building on their responses.
- The facilitator oversees the process to discourage dialogue and to ensure evaluative practices (positive or negative) are avoided.

Definitional Ceremony





## Care for Those who Care: a narrative expression exercise

Care for Those who Care

The Care for Those who Care exercise is a technique which proposes a set of questions as a possible map for narrative conversations, which starts with the question of who takes care of those who take care of others. It was developed in 2020 by Sabine Vermeire for use in the health sector, as a way to help doctors, nurses, etc. develop a map for possible narrative conversations about their experience of working throughout the pandemic,

It was deemed suitable for use in the ENABLES workshops as it is a method of particular relevance for educators during stressful times, such as the Covid19 pandemic.

The Care for Those who Care approach is based around the use of questions to support ongoing conversations which can inspire people and those people who are important around them.

Further details of the Care for Those who Care approach can be found on the ENABLES website or here: [Narrative traces in Corona times Vermeire](#)



## Magical Day: a narrative expression exercise

Magical Day is an activity in which people are invited to think of a desired place or time, as if it were a magical day. The activity involves a series of scaffolded questions and explores aspects of (professional) identity. This activity is adapted from Hugh Fox's (2011) work on Narrative Therapy.

The activity is built on the premise that we are narrative beings and we all have narrative skills. Working in pairs, participants can interview each other and are asked to imagine a desired place, space or time as if it were a magical day. The process involves scaffolded questions which allow participants to explore aspects of their identity, their values and their hopes.

The purpose of the Magical Day activity is to establish a feeling of community in which participants can enrich understanding of themselves and of others, identify shared and perhaps different hopes, and render each other transparent and known.

On the ENABLES website, you will find a short video outlining the Magical Day exercise, and how it can be used in workshops to develop capacity for distributed leadership.

Magical Day

[https://youtu.be/8\\_01y4AdPeo](https://youtu.be/8_01y4AdPeo)



## What did participants feel they learned from using narrative expression exercises and sharing these practices with others?

Participants in the ENABLES workshops reported a range of benefits from engaging with the narrative expression exercises. The benefits can be summarised into three main areas:

- Personal development, including evoking long-forgotten memories of people and events
- Professional development, including understanding different ways to teach and reflect on practice
- Development of leadership capabilities

They reported for example that the narrative exercises used in the workshops had helped them heighten awareness of self and others, increase communicative capabilities and learn through collaboration.

- Increased capacity for self-knowledge and knowledge of others
- Identified important personal and professional values
- Strengthened a sense of 'professional community'
- Identified common fears and joys relating to professional life
- Diminished fears about sharing feelings with others
- Increased skills of verbal and written expression



## Learning from using narrative expression exercises: A selection of participants' reflections

### Awareness of self and others

- *It's worth turning our eyes more often to who we are, where we come from, where we go, what we leave behind!*
- *As teachers we are oriented more towards listening to others, towards recognizing and supporting them. Therefore, verbalization about ourselves and recognition of personal qualities becomes difficult because it is a fairly rare exercise that we do for ourselves.*
- *We all need a moment to pause, to look back, to analyse our future, and to dare to explore the future to see the chances we can create for ourselves.*
- *It was possible to create a connection between the participants, the power of the words being the one thing that generated many possibilities of (self)knowledge.*
- *The fact that I felt appreciated and motivated to continue in certain professional aspects, the idea that some things I do can become examples for others. That it is an exercise in cultivating self-esteem and that we can do it in a few minutes to be able to identify notable aspects of our professional activity.*

### Views of leadership

- *A good leader is the one who can convince people's minds and win their souls. I believe that through these narrative techniques, this mission can be accomplished.*
- *This technique can develop leadership skills, in the sense of coaching and coordinating a team of people, by facilitating their mutual knowledge.*

A decorative graphic consisting of seven overlapping circles in various colors: purple, blue, red, pink, green, yellow, and dark blue.

## Finally, what do we need to bear in mind when thinking about facilitating activities using narrative expression exercises?

Key considerations when designing workshops using narrative expression techniques include how to create a warm, open and welcoming atmosphere and the experience and expertise of the facilitators. Skillful facilitators can help ‘break the ice’ with groups of participants who perhaps do not know each other by communicating in way that encourages participants to engage in a range of activities and discussions.

When there is more than one facilitator, it helps to have clear and precise roles. In these ENABLES workshops, the activities were facilitated by someone with extensive experience not only in the theory of these narrative techniques but also in the practical use and application of them in different contexts and settings.

Other considerations include the duration of the workshops, especially when they are online, and the careful adaptation of offline methods when used online. If scheduling workshops to accommodate participants who work, participants may feel tired; however, the nature of the narrative techniques engaged participants in a way that encouraged them to engage. It is unsure whether face-to-face workshops would have allowed participants to connect more deeply with others.

In summary, workshops using narrative techniques require a keen understanding of the potential uses of the techniques as well as a degree of practice using such techniques. A safe and trusting environment allows participants to engage and connect.



## What to bear in mind: a summary

### Key points to consider:

- understanding of the exercises is vital
- importance of skilful facilitation
- some experience of the exercises is helpful
- create a safe and trusting space
- can work with relatively large groups
- offer support and encouragement, if needed
- emphasise there is no right or wrong way
- it's ok to feel a bit uncomfortable
- using these exercises online can work well



## Summary Points

### **Narrative expression:**

- can be revelatory
- offers a different way of thinking about leadership
- supports self-reflection
- supports collaborative learning

### **Narrative expression helps distributed leadership by:**

- enhancing sensitivity to and awareness of self and others
- supporting articulation of authentic values
- enhancing communicative skills



# Further resources relating to narrative expression and distributed leadership

## **The Basics**

Distributed leadership information document  
Distributed leadership information audio  
Arts-based embodied information document  
Arts-based embodied information audio

## **Resources**

ARTs at a Glance document  
Something Meritorious video & document  
Tree of Life video & document  
Definitional Ceremony document  
Magical Day video & document  
Care for Those who Care document  
Participants' reflections (audio recording)

## **Research**

Narrative expression & reflection: ARTs report

All available via the ENABLES website: [www.herts.ac.uk/study/schools-of-study/education/research/enables](http://www.herts.ac.uk/study/schools-of-study/education/research/enables)





## References

We directly referenced these four publications in this guide:

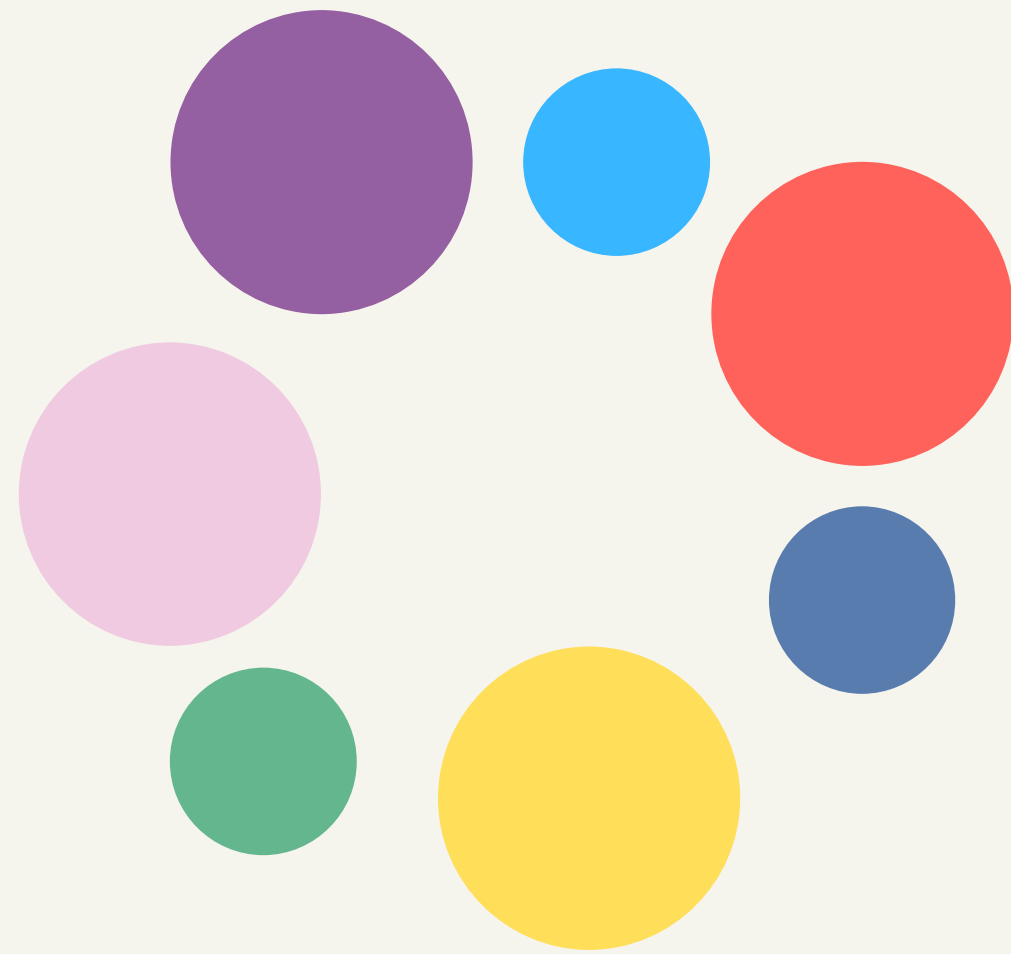
Fox, H. (2011) Training Handbook. Matlock: Institute of Narrative Therapy UK.

Gavrilovici, O. & Dronic, A. (2020). Increasing professionals' knowledge and skills to deal with violent radicalisation. In P. Meringolo (Ed.), Preventing violent radicalization in Europe. Multidisciplinary perspectives.

Ncube, N. (2006). The tree of life: Using narrative ideas in work with vulnerable children in South Africa. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, 1, 3 – 16.

White, M. (2007). *Maps of narrative practice* (1st ed.). New York: W.W. Norton & Co.

Further references are available in the Narrative Expression and Reflection report, available via the ENABLES website: [www.herts.ac.uk/study/schools-of-study/education/research/enables](http://www.herts.ac.uk/study/schools-of-study/education/research/enables)



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The publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein

Further information on the project is available here:  
[www.herts.ac.uk/study/schools-of-study/education/research/enables](http://www.herts.ac.uk/study/schools-of-study/education/research/enables)

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