

Making Dialogue – Principles for Leading

Principle #1: Encourage as Many Voices as Possible

Civic dialogue in a democracy requires participation. We know some students will be more or less comfortable with actively speaking up, so part of leading a good dialogue is to find opportunities for as many voices as possible to join the conversation.

- **Students Speak for Themselves** - People can represent and speak for who they are as themselves in a class setting.
- **Be Attentive to Norms** - Ask the group if there are any additional norms they would like recognized.
- **Be Ready to Diffuse and Deescalate** - Remind students to treat one another respectfully, and approach challenges with curiosity.

Principle #2: Encourage as Many Ideas as Possible

Often the goal of civic dialogue is not to persuade but to learn from each other. Leading good dialogue requires being able to bring out *different* perspectives, and have participants feel able to share things even when others might disagree.

- **Encourage Difference** - Creating an environment where students see difference as a chance to learn from diverse viewpoints rather than a threat to their beliefs.
- **Create a Safe Enough Space** – Be aware of your own biases, and be sure those don't make people feel unsafe sharing opposing perspectives.
- **Consider All Sides** - When presenting ideas you might disagree with try offering a “steel person” rather than a “straw person” – think through the best argument for the other side.

Principle #3: Spend Time in Advance on Logistics

Sometimes you get lucky, and a conversation will just flow. But most of the time, you need to prepare just as intensively as if you were going to be offering a lecture on a specific topic.

- **Create a Checklist** - Make a checklist for creating a message with topics and goals.
- **Leave Time** - Build in time to debrief so participants can put a “close to the conversation.”
- **Analyze Potential Audience** - Consider how to draw on the perspectives of students of differing majors and/or class years.

Principle #4: Build an Arsenal of Techniques

When organizing community conversations, Oregon Humanities suggests that techniques should be your next concern after logistics – have some go to questions, prompts, and responses that are likely to enrich any conversation.

- **Invite participation** - Have ways of getting as many students involved as possible – connecting easy questions with clear opportunities to join the conversation.
- **Draw on stories** - Experiences often shape and form viewpoints in a more influential way than facts and data.
- **Don't Take Anything at Face Value** - Probe to help truly clarify what the participant is saying by asking questions.

Principle #5: Reflect and Evaluate Effectively

Be reflective about the values and purpose of your discussion – good dialogue often arises from some underlying sense of shared values, and a sense that the conversation is worthwhile even if it doesn't solve an immediate problem.

- **Vibe Matters** - The participants will leave your session with knowledge and hope.
- **Connect With Values** - For example, UP has identified six key values for us to aspire to: *dignity, community, inquiry, ethics, engagement, and hope*. These might serve as criteria to evaluate how the conversation went.
- **Evaluate Success After Completion** - Rose, Bud, Thorn – Get participants' perspectives as well.

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Where these ideas came from, and where you can find more...

Braver Angels | <https://braverangels.org/>

This organization specializes in bringing people from different backgrounds to unite people rather than divide. They offer a variety of experiences from training to host conversations to creating a space where YOU could talk to someone who has views differing from yours.

National Civic League | <https://www.nationalcivicleague.org/>

This organization hosts trainings, events, and lots of online resources to advance civic engagement and make the decision-making process more “participatory, equitable, and effective”

Constructive Dialogue Institute | <https://constructivedialogue.org/>

CDI focuses on equipping individuals and institutions with the skill to create and build a culture of constructive dialogue. They have various webinars and trainings to check out.

American Association of Colleges and Universities | <https://www.aacu.org/>

This organization focuses on creating effective learning tools for higher education. They created the Democracy Re/Designed toolkit which helps with the goal of improving democratic structures and the decision-making process

Living Room conversations | <https://livingroomconversations.org/>

Living Room Conversations helps create and facilitate spaces for having conversations that foster connection and understanding. Some of their conversation guides include topics that range from Capitalism to Empathy

Oregon Humanities | <https://www.oregonhumanities.org/>

This local organization strives to bring people together from different beliefs, backgrounds, and experiences. They offer hundreds of public conversations each year across the state with connection with others in mind.

Monica Guzman’s *I Never Thought of It That Way* | <https://www.moniguzman.com/book>

Through personal narrative, Monica Guzman encourages us to stay curious and look beyond the political divide in an increasingly polarized world. The book helps readers have difficult conversations by providing useful tips for asking questions, staying curious, and finding common ground.

Eboo Patel’s *We Need to Build* | <https://www.interfaithamerica.org/article/america-the-peoples-potluck/>

The founder of Interfaith America, Eboo Patel, takes us through the various ways that we can create a diverse and efficient democracy. Providing tips and personal narratives to achieve this goal.



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This document was prepared by Joaquin Valencia, Tommy McCaffrey, Andrew Guest, and Shaz Vijlee with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities and University of Portland’s Public Research Fellows program.

In Dialogue – Principles for Participation

Principle #1: Civic Dialogue Is a Skill Everyone Should Learn

Anyone can build those skills with a bit of effort and intention, especially when you are reflective about your own strengths and weaknesses (i.e., asking good questions, being a good listener, being clear and concise, etc.)

- **Participate** - Democracy requires participation. Classrooms can often allow for voluntary participation, but the spirit of this activity requires as many voices as possible. Try to participate even if it makes you uncomfortable in the moment, because that's how we grow.
- **Embrace Complexity** - Sometimes conversations can become abstract, take it slow to truly understand what is being discussed.
- **Don't Dominate** - Be sure to not dominate the conversation. Allow all participants to speak.

Principle #2: Good Listening Is as Important as Good Talking

Listening well is just as important as talking well – but both matter! Active listening means being fully present, avoiding distractions, asking follow-up questions for clarity, and reflecting on what you hear with an open mind.

- **Respect is Key** - Be respectful of other students, try not to interrupt others
- **Active Listening is a Must** - Body language is important, a polite nod, good eye contact, or acknowledgment goes a long way
- **Get Unstuck** - If you are hearing something you can't get past – try naming it, unpacking it, and moving forward.

Principle #3: The Goal Is to Learn, Not to Win

The goal of civic dialogue is not to win, but to learn and build community. You can often best show up for dialogue by bringing an open mind, and openness to learning, and a willingness to consider that you might be wrong.

- **Stay Curious** - approach disagreement with curiosity instead of accusation
- **Have Intellectual Integrity** - Give others the benefit of the doubt.
- **Keep an Open Mind** - Approach civil discourse in class with an open mind with a desire for truth and learning.

Principle #4: Be Fully Engaged with The Conversation

Showing respect requires effort. Make obvious efforts to engage with others, and avoid distractions. If you are unsure about confidentiality, ask.

- **Be Present** - Do your best to stay focused by using technology as little as possible.
- **Honor Confidentiality** - others' stories are only theirs to tell.
- **Appreciate Others** - When you hear something insightful, say so. If you disagree, try to first make sure you fully understand where the disagreement originates.

Principle #5: Help Keep The Conversation Going

Building a tool kit for your own participation can help you keep the conversation going when it seems to get stuck or stalled. Have a few go-to questions and moves that you feel comfortable using in a dialogue.

- **Ask CARE questions**
 - Curious – Ask questions that indicate you are curious and want to know more
 - Answerable – Be sure to ask questions that can reasonably answered
 - Raw – Not all questions have to be complicated, ask questions about feelings or visions.
 - Exploring – don't be afraid to ask questions that steer the conversation and adds more depth

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