

10 Common Tools for Dialogue

Dialogue may occur in many different contexts or settings. It is not limited to a structured forum or an isolated event. Below, we discuss 10 common and creative tools that can be used to spark and nurture community dialogue. Use them alone, adapt them to your community or combine them together. There is no limit to the possibilities when it comes to dialogue.



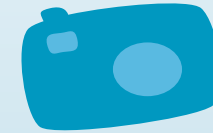
1. CONVERSATION CAFÉS

Coffee shops, from their very beginning, have not only been places that serve hot beverages, but have always been locations for partaking in social life. Conversation Cafés are open conversations in coffee shops or any other publicly accessed community setting including restaurants, conference rooms, churches or more. The simple format allows a group to feel at ease while providing a space and time to be heard. Conversation Cafés encourage us to shift from discussion to dialogue in exploration of thoughtful questions with careful consideration to listening and understanding. With the capacity to adapt to groups of varying size, Conversation Cafés stimulate dialogue through the exchange of ideas, perspectives and values that underpin our beliefs.



2. DINNER & DIALOGUE

To eat is to meet. A dinner dialogue (or kitchen table discussion) is an encounter that takes place over a meal. Human beings have been using meal time as a natural opportunity to discuss issues for millennia. In our super-charged lifestyles, pausing to eat together and having meaningful conversations about issues that matter (like changing cannabis policy) might be health-promoting. In a planned “Dinner & Dialogue,” while there is no formal agenda, there is a focused intention to engage with one another around a particular topic. Sometimes the meal is collaboratively prepared. This can nurture relationships prior to sitting down to eat and discuss, or the dialogue may actually begin less formally during the preparation. Having some well-chosen questions or sending out an article related to the topic of interest with the invitations can act as a catalyst for a rich dialogue.



3. PHOTOVOICE

Photovoice is a community-based participatory research method that utilizes photography to document and reflect participants’ reality with a goal to work towards influencing healthy public policy. By showcasing photos about hidden and often overlooked issues within communities, policy makers have an opportunity to engage with those whose voices are not being heard. A fun and creative methodology, Photovoice provides an alternative to traditional ways of knowing and values knowledge that is grounded in lived experience. To use Photovoice in dialogue, you must ensure opportunities for people to interact around the meaning of the photos produced.



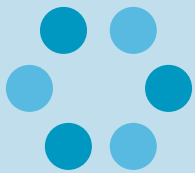
4. SILENT DISCUSSIONS

Silent discussions provide an opportunity for everyone, especially those less likely to speak up, to contribute and have their ideas heard. Stations are created with the intent to explore multiple questions on a given topic through collaboratively writing on a shared roll of paper. As participants rotate through the stations, they have an opportunity to not only personally reflect on the topic but also build off the ideas of others. This activity can be used to showcase the varying perspectives that make up a group and encourage dialogue as participants come together to debrief afterwards.



5. PORTRAITURE

Portraiture is a creative way to work with art and images symbolically and investigate questions that push us into deeper thinking. Using the outline of a silhouette of themselves, participants can fill in the space with visual indicators or collages (e.g., words, drawings, magazine photos, narratives, etc.) creating a self-portrait that reflects their own thoughts and feelings on the topic. Upon completion, participants resume in a larger group to share their creations. Display of these visual representations of different perspectives can itself invite empathy. Opportunities for participants to share their portraits further in group conversations increase the potential for enhanced understanding of and identification with others.



7. TALKING CIRCLES

Certain First Nations communities have used talking circles to address challenges they face. In order to explore a given topic, a talking object is introduced and passed clockwise in a circle. In order to promote deep listening, participants are encouraged only to speak once they receive the object. The object can rotate multiple times through the circle as participants deepen their thoughts and respond to others. Used alone or in conjunction with other activities, a talking circle is an activity that can be used with groups of any size and in exploration of any topic.



6. COMMUNITY ARTS

Art is more than entertainment. Art provides a way for communities to come together and nurture integration. It can contribute to people's sense of identity while fostering a shared meaning within communities. Methods such as participatory theatre or community art shows are ways to showcase varying perspectives and encourage dialogue. You can use community art as a jumping-off point for further inquiry. Dialogue is sparked when we dig into the experiences of the other in order to learn and understand.



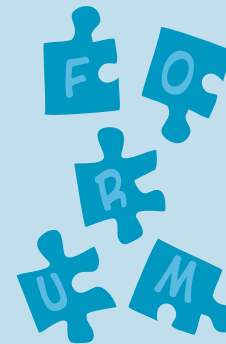
8. COLLABORATIVE DRAWING

Collaborative drawing is a creative way of harnessing the wisdom and capacity of groups of any size. By using a roll of paper as the context for presenting ideas and comments, we can begin to tell our story through art and drawing. Collaborative drawing means we all come together to learn from the experience in the community by thinking and working together. By each taking a corner or building off each other's work, we begin to see another perspective that extends past the boundary of our own experience. Having participants move to other parts of the paper at intervals accentuates the interconnecting of experiences.



9. WALKING TOURS

Walking tours are creative ways for participants to engage with different perspectives while touring a particular setting. As a way to encourage understanding, tour guides provide stories and context as participants walk and experience together. By physically walking the path of others, tours are geared towards greater understanding between diverse individuals who happen to live differently within the same community. In order for this method to be dialogic, ensure that it is more than a narrated excursion. This means creating ample opportunities for participants and guides to exchange, reflect and share different perspectives.



10. COMMUNITY FORUMS

Community forums are events where groups of any size or any demographic can gather and exchange ideas. A word of caution: it can be difficult to get to dialogue when using this methodology. Too often events of this type are used for one-directional information dissemination where little or no dialogue occurs between participants. If you are using this methodology, be sure to plan the event around opportunities for participants to share with each other in non-performance contexts. This is far beyond a short "question and answer period" after an "expert panel" presentation. For example, successful dialogue forums might involve the use of one or more of the other activities in this list.