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Prepare · Plant · Cultivate · Harvest
A Field Guide to Convening Dialogue

By Joanna Ashworth
Simon Fraser University

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Simon Fraser University

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Illustrations: Devin H. Ashworth

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How to use this guide

This question-based guide is designed for anyone who plans to host a dialogue gathering—whether for a brief afternoon or an extended series of meetings over time.

After years of convening dialogues through SFU’s Dialogue Program I have learned that dialogue is a journey of inquiry that often produces surprising and inventive outcomes.

The experience seems to work best when thoughtful convenors take the time to attend to their plans with care. As hosts, our work is to create a safe space for deep listening and meaningful talking. It is both a responsibility and an honour to do so.

The questions in this guide are organized around four components — ones that seasoned gardeners will know are important:

- 1) Prepare
- 2) Plant
- 3) Cultivate
- 4) Harvest.

Keep these disarmingly simple ways in mind as you prepare the ground for fruitful talk and meaningful outcomes.



Prepare

Clarify your purpose (what is the vision that you hold and how does dialogue play a role?)

What is the context for this gathering?

- Ask: Is there a compelling reason to convene?
- Ask: Who should be part of this conversation?
- Ask: Who should be involved in the planning of this gathering?

Identify what success looks like after the dialogue

Understand the meaning of dialogue

Develop a personal and organizational capacity for dialogue

Identify ground rules or guides for dialogue

Make a plan for the venue, set up, activities, food or other necessities

Communicate the invitation widely



Plant

Create powerful questions

- Ask: Does the question challenge, inspire or invite our imagination?

Discover the stories that capture complexity and meaning

- Ask: What are the stories of experience that have the potential to jumpstart our dialogue?

Consider the role of artists, forms of art making or other active methods of interaction to enhance talking and listening

- Ask: What are some ways to express an idea, vision or story beyond words?

Ensure that the setting is inviting and comfortable for all

Demonstrate the three “E”s of dialogue: empathy, equality and examine assumptions



Cultivate

Practice skillful facilitation, i.e., encourage healthy interaction with a balance of inquiry and respectful opposition

Learn some dialogue moves!

- Connect ideas. Invite quiet voices in. Draw out diverse viewpoints. Reflect on process. Offer stories or creative approaches during impasses. Ask for silent reflection.

Play games — skits, role-plays, scenario building...

Inquire into assumptions

- Ask (with respect): Tell me more. What do you mean? How did you arrive at that conclusion?

Practice active perspective taking: Put yourself in someone else's shoes! Literally!



Harvest

Gather and cluster ideas

Note themes and key issues

Ask for collective reflection

Search for shared meaning and learning

- Ask: What surprised you?

Consider the implications for action.

- Ask: What will you/we do now?

Reflect on process and outcomes — Did these match our intended outcomes?

- Ask: What new relationships and or ideas have we generated?

Communicate clearly what you (the convenors) are prepared to do now.

- Offer: What is our leadership role and what is our call to action for those gathered?

Bring closure to the gathering in a respectful and inclusive way

- Try: Form a closing circle and invite final reflections on learning and/or the impact of the dialogue

What is dialogue?

Dialogue is a process of collective exploration. It is a focused and productive conversation carried out in the spirit of learning, collaboration and the search for understanding.

Dialogue requires the capacity to suspend one's own deeply held views and a willingness to openly examine an issue, situation or question from diverse perspectives.

It calls for imagination, respect and generosity of spirit.

It also involves a commitment to candour.

There may be conflict. This can be a good thing. You may need to find the balance between advocating for your view to be heard and inquiring into another's point of view.

To engage in dialogue try to slow down, prepare the ground well and enjoy the fruits of the harvest – new relationships, unexpected ideas, a deeper and fuller understanding of a situation and, quite possibly, a stronger foundation for working collaboratively with others.

www.sfu.ca/dialogue

Dialogue Programs, Continuing Studies, Simon Fraser University