FACILITATING DISCUSSION
AN INTRODUCTION TO GUIDING PUBLIC DIALOGUE

DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION STUDIES
INSTITUTE FOR CIVIC DISCOURSE AND DEMOCRACY
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In a fundamental way, communication is how we create our world. At its core, communication animates and makes possible democratic practice. The opportunity to explore diverse ideas and experiences is a central tenet of higher education and an informed and educated society. For students, faculty, staff, and guests on college and university campuses, the freedom of thought and expression is one of the things that make higher education an important and unique institution of American life and for any democratic society. But the freedom to speak diminishes a community if it is not aligned with intentional efforts to listen, understand, and engage.

For those committed to participatory and inclusive public discourse, there is an important discussion to be had that can inform our collective thinking about highly emotional and contentious “wicked” problems (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Rather than thinking individually, dialogue and deliberation help us to better understand a broader range of values, perspectives, and views on the issues. Through healthy public discussion, we might come to have more informed public judgment (Yankelovich, 1991) about the complex intricacies impacting our lives.

To make public dialogue and deliberation possible, a range of processes can be utilized (Kaner, 2014). But regardless of the particular process used for a particular discussion, the role of the facilitator becomes central when

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thinking about constructive public discourse. Facilitated dialogue and deliberation create space for voices and perspectives to be articulated and heard. It enables the **possibility** of civil discourse. Facilitated public discussion makes possible the exploration of diverse ideas and experiences that contribute to collective understanding about what it means to belong to the particular organization or community that is at the heart of the discussion. Facilitation cultivates space for participants to be fully engaged without feeling that discussion is being shaped in a biased way from the person leading the discussion. A helpful way to think about facilitation is through passionate impartiality, which “is not simply dull, detached neutrality, but an *engaged* impartiality that passionately supports democracy and the values it entails, such as freedom, equality, inclusion, transparency, trust, and mutual respect” (Carcasson, 2010, p. 16).

Significant progress can happen on wicked problems when citizens—as opposed to experts—are at the center of decision-making. This has led a growing number of traditional decision makers to realize that public problems are too complex for them to resolve alone. That’s why they are increasingly reaching out and convening diverse groups of community residents and organizations to identify issues and then develop and implement strategies to address them.

These kinds of efforts—which are broadly understood as “dialogue” and “deliberation”—have also been occurring in educational settings, including many colleges and universities around the world. These processes are essential to not only solve problems by getting more voices into the conversation; they also teach democratic citizenship. Given the significance of this work, it is essential to offer some clarity about what we mean by these terms.

There are many within this field who offer definitions and work to clarify what can otherwise be muddied and confusing terminology of these concepts (Escobar, 2011).

At the most basic level, dialogue is not about trying to win an argument (the realm of debate); rather, dialogue is a
collaborative and relational process to engage with others and co-create meaning. At the ontological level, in the words of philosopher Martin Buber, “the basic movement of life of dialogue is the turning towards the other” (1947, p. 22). Educators, such as bell hooks, Paulo Freire, Meg Wheatley, and Myles Horton, have since expanded these ideas to make dialogue a fundamental vehicle for understanding issues and making social change.

With echoes of the seminal writings of Martin Buber and scholarly work in the area of communication studies, Laura Black (2015, p. 365) describes dialogue as “communication that involves a moment of full mutuality between people.” Further, dialogue is “a way of speaking and relating in which both parties are fully present, open about their ideas, and accepting of the other people involved, even while engaging in disagreement” (Black 2015, pp. 365-366). Dialogue is viewed as a way of being and a way of communicating between people or groups.

Deliberation adds another dimension to dialogue, and it often comes after or intersects with dialogue. Specifically, deliberation is a process where a diverse group of people moves towards making a collective decision on a difficult public issue. Most well-known as part of the jury system in the US, deliberation involves weighing trade-offs and tensions, recognizing competing values and interests, and coming to what has been termed “public judgment” (Yankelovich & Friedman, 2010). Public deliberation, according to David Mathews of the Kettering Foundation, is used in situations “when there are competing imperatives about what is worth most to us and our collective well-being, we deliberate with others to make decisions” (Mathews 2014, p. 75).

Being able to make sense of and appreciate the different forms of public discussion becomes important as you approach others in a constructive discussion. Clear expectations and alignment between processes and goals is essential.
Most complex social and public policy issues are best understood as “wicked problems” (Rittel & Webber, 1973). These challenges cannot be solved with technical fixes or the usual way of doing business. They involve complex issues with competing values, multiple perspectives, and tough trade-offs. As Martín Carcasson (2017) notes, wicked problems “call for ongoing communicative processes of broad engagement to address underlying competing values and tensions.” As a response, he offers that a “deliberative mindset” can help “develop mutual understanding across

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Source: Escobar (2011)
perspectives, negotiate the underlying competing values, and invent, support, and constantly adapt collaborative actions” (p. 3).

A critical first step for taking action is being able to discuss with others what one is seeing as a problem and how to approach it. In language that we’ll speak to below, it is about naming and framing an issue in public ways (Rourke, 2014). How we “name” the problems we need to talk about is a fundamental first step for addressing wicked problems because it identifies the problem that we need to talk about in a public way.

People name problems in conversations all the time, and the process of “naming” the problem is an attempt to capture people’s experiences and concerns. David Mathews (2016) explains that these conversations revolve around ordinary questions which identify what is valuable to them, such as: What’s bothering you? Why do you care? How are you going to be affected? When people respond to these questions, they are identifying what is valuable to them (p. 4). This is the first step towards being engaged and being “more likely to participate in making decisions and to see that…[citizens] have power to affect their future” (Rourke, 2014, p. 3).

Public discussion is possible when people express a willingness to engage meaningfully and authentically, exploring through communication a better understanding and knowledge about a topic. In this sense, civility becomes paramount to how to engage in such communicative processes. While “civility” can be understood simply to be about following a predetermined set of rules that are biased to certain ways of engaging in discourse (civility as “politeness”), there is a richer sense of civility as “responsiveness” drawing on the thinking of John Rawls (Laden, 2019, p. 13-14):

- The ideal of citizenship imposes a moral, not a legal, duty—the duty of civility—to be able to explain to one another on those fundamental questions how the principles and policies they advocate and vote for can be supported by the political values of public reason.
This duty also involves a willingness to listen to others and a fair-mindedness in deciding when accommodations to their views should reasonably be made.

If the slogan for civility as politeness is “we can disagree without being disagreeable,” then the slogan for civility as responsiveness might be “we can agree to disagree” or perhaps better, “disagreement is no reason to stop talking with one another.”

Civility holds a paradoxical place in our culture and public discourse. This tension is noted by William Keith and Robert Danisch (2020, p. 1):

“For some, civility is an unquestioned good whose lack is to be mourned; the loss of civility makes them wonder if we are politically in crisis and how we can continue without improved civility. For others, civility is the source of our problems, responsible for the failure of calcified systems of oppression to change; if only, they think, we were not constrained to be so nice, then maybe real change would be possible. Both sides can point to cases for evidence of their claims, and we would be foolish to think that a strong element of truth does not reside in both characterizations.”

For those interested in learning about facilitating skills useful in a variety of civic, workplace, and organizational settings, the centrality of understanding the benefits and limits of civility is a key to making possible the opportunity for public discussion.

The next chapter focuses on some basic skills that enable the facilitation of public discussion.
This is a snapshot of the Engagement Streams Framework developed by Sandy Heierbacher and members of the National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation (NCDD) in 2005. The framework helps people decide which methods of dialogue and deliberation best fit their goals and resources.

For the full framework, go to www.ncdd.org/streams.
Conversation is natural. In many ways, we might think about public dialogue as being similar to what we do with friends, family, classmates, and colleagues all the time. But there is important work to be done when trying to create space for democratic discussion with others and the role of a facilitator becomes critical in making that possible.

ICDD promotes civil conversation at a time when Americans are deeply divided. We hold different values, faiths, and beliefs that influence how we perceive our needs and priorities. And yet we must continue to engage with one another on intentionally political subjects that shape our sense of community and belonging. Our university and broader democracy depend on it.

Key to civic public dialogue is remembering what that means: a discussion with mutual respect. We all want our views to be heard and fully understood and considered. But only when we actively listen to another person and their ideas, and they really listen to us, can we avoid the undesired effect of fruitful discussion becoming winner-take-all debate. Sometimes being heard in this way is enough to build the sort of relational trust and social capital to improve the nature of future interactions.

Public discussions are a space to explore different views, experiences, and sources of information and knowledge about a shared issue.

The ability to engage in authentic, vibrant, face-to-face discussion among people of opposing views is an important skill. We want people to express their views freely. At the same time, we want to maintain a civil dialogue that avoids personal attacks and does not become a debate rather than a discussion.
Having such conversations is a fundamental way to understand one another—and ourselves. However, these don’t happen by themselves. Facilitators provide structure and a process for robust and meaningful discussion.

Public discussion is an opportunity to learn from and with one another. As a facilitator, be clear about the intent behind the dialogue or deliberative process. Below are some generic tips to consider when facilitating public discussions.

**FACILITATOR TIPS**

**Begin with ground rules.** Civic discourse is best when you have a shared sense of expectations of how the public dialogue will occur. Speak about the “Ground Rules for Public Discussion,” briefly. Highlight the importance of diverse viewpoints and the need to listen thoughtfully and carefully. Importantly, have people offer support for their statements and claims—more than simply “I read somewhere that...” Encourage participants to ground sharing in one’s own experience. Invite any additions to the stated ground rules, but note that this list is generally sufficient so don’t feel you need to spend excessive time on adding additional rules.

**Facilitate with passionate impartiality.** “Passionate impartiality is not simply dull, detached neutrality, but an *engaged* impartiality that passionately supports democracy and the values it entails, such as freedom, equality, inclusion, transparency, trust, and mutual respect” (Carcasson, 2010). Improving the quality of public communication concerning important public problems requires skilled facilitation. As someone encouraging and supporting others to share candidly, it is important not to be perceived as being biased or interested in only hearing certain types of sharing. Focus on the discussion process and don’t interject your views.
Be mindful of groupthink & embrace constructive dissent.
If the group is likeminded, be thoughtful about how to raise other considerations and explore, through discussion, the other possibilities and experiences related to the particular topic at hand. Invite participants to consider other approaches or reactions to issues. Dissent is important, especially as you move from divergent to convergent thinking about what it means to create a community of belonging (Nemeth, 2018). The important reminder here is to embrace the multiple stories in order to have them contribute to the shared story and future steps for K-State to foster a community of belonging.

Practice saying, “Yes—and...”
Try to build on each other’s ideas as they come up rather than evaluating or criticizing them right away.

Remain aware of the time constraints for each section.
Any public discussion is ideally designed around the introduction of people’s stories through the panel presentation and then move into small group discussion. The building of discussion from one’s own story to the sharing of and listening to stories, takes time. To do this within the allotted amount of time, it is imperative to keep track of the ways in which time is being used.

Embrace divergence rather than convergence.
Sam Kaner’s (2014, p. 20) diamond model of participatory decision-making involves three distinct yet connected stages: divergent thinking, working through, and convergent thinking leading to a decision point. Allow this conversation to stay, largely, in the divergent zone. You are not being asked or expected to come to resolution. It is about exploring ideals and possibilities rather than trying to come to a shared conclusion based on convergence and agreement.
MANAGING PARTICIPANTS

In addition to general facilitation tips, there are some additional practical steps that you might

The ‘expert’
- If they are long-winded, you must rein them in: “… and the point is?” (smile while saying this).
- If they are intimidating others, specifically ask for other opinions.
- Ask them to make the point from another person’s perspective: – “Jane, you have a great deal of experience in this area, what is one of the best alternative comments you’ve heard about this.”
- You may have to talk to them privately between sessions.

The introvert
- Ask them a question by name – “Jane, what do you think about that?”
- Keep gently inviting them with questions but don’t force them to answer.
- Some people are ‘early’ introverts because they initially don’t trust the process, and some people observe first and comment later. Trust must be earned and these people will often be more active participants in a second session.

The side conversationalist
- Nip it in the bud – “Excuse me, one at a time please. John, please continue.”
- After John finishes go to the side conversationalist and ask for his/her response. This shows that you are interested in what they had to say and were not ‘scolding’ them.

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This section is adapted from the Interactivity Foundation’s “Tips for Facilitating an IF Discussion” available at https://www.interactivityfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Tips-for-Facilitating-an-IF-Discussion.pdf.
Importantly, there are different communication styles that come into play in any public dialogue that shape the dynamics of how people engage in discourse. These include:

**The turn-taker:** a person who waits until the other person is finished talking before speaking.

**The pauser:** a person who not only waits until the other finishes talking before talking in turn, but actually allows for a pause or silence before talking.

**The interrupter:** a person who tends to cut the other person in conversation off by starting to speak before the other is finished speaking.

Being able to recognize these communication styles and how they allow the agreed-upon ground rules to shape the discussion relies on the facilitator to serve as an impartial moderator, embodying passion about the process and remaining outside of the substance of the discussion to ensure participation is possible for the range of persons involved.

At its best, facilitating public dialogue is an opportunity to help a naturally occurring conversation and exchange. You may find it easy to give the group more ownership of the dialogue. Or you could feel like you need to give more guidance and structure. Regardless, it is important to keep in mind some of these tips and points of information but not feel you need to focus exhaustively on them.

As a facilitator, try to appear as comfortable and natural as possible; you will realize that participants will read your body language and non-verbal cues as an indication of how they should be. Remember, structured public discussion is not a nature form of communication for some people; acknowledging this way of having discussion is important at you facilitate public discussions.
Ground Rules for Public Discussion

Seek understanding and common ground
Expect and explore conflicting viewpoints
Give everyone an opportunity to speak
Listen respectfully and thoughtfully
Offer and examine support for claims
Appreciate communication differences
Stay focused on issues
Respect time limits

The Institute for Civic Discourse and Democracy


The mission of the Institute for Civic Discourse and Democracy (ICDD) is to build community capacity for civic discourse and democratic engagement through educational opportunities for students, faculty, staff, and community partners across the State of Kansas.

ICDD was formed in 2004 as an interdisciplinary, non-partisan organization in response to polarization and increasingly complex public issues that challenge democratic decision-making. ICDD engages in research, education, and facilitation of civic conversations to promote greater citizen participation through deliberation and dialogue. It continues this work and contributes to the work of the Department of Communication Studies through teaching, research, and engagement opportunities.