

Hosting conversations

The central question for every facilitator whether in a futuring workshop or any other participatory session is how to host a group conversation where everyone's voice is heard, the outcome is shared, the vision arising from the conversations is collective and the group is committed to realising it?

There are no recipes that will make every conversation a good one, as there are too many variables, including your own personality and history and the diverse characters and backgrounds of the participants (See also [integral futures](#)¹). Aside from the unpredictability of the situation, hosting conversations is a craft, which can only be learned through practice and can take many shapes and forms. All that said, there are a few basic forms which can be applied in many of the techniques and methods mentioned in the Futurist Fieldguide: the monologue, dialogue, the triads and the circle. Each of the forms is suitable for a particular type of conversation: individual contemplation draws out the deeper personal information; a dialogue is intimate, a triad is active, breakout groups diverse and a circle tends to be unifying.

Process

All the conversation formats are variations of the basic process:

- Step 0: The facilitator frames the conversation
- Step 1: One person speaks, the other(s) listen
- Step 2: Another person speaks, the other(s) listen (repeat as many times as required)
- Step 3: Participants and/or facilitator summarise the conversation and in some cases report to the whole group
- Step 4: Reflect on the outcomes of the conversation.

For the facilitator, the role is more or less the same in all formats:

- Explaining the exercise and what is expected (framing flow and topic)
- Moderating/Facilitating the conversation
 - Steering conversations to the topic/question
 - Keeping watch over group dynamics and people's energy levels ('holding the space')
 - Including everyone in the conversation
 - Reminding people of instructions and house rules (discretely)
- Time keeping and announcing (think about what would be an appropriate prop - bells, cymbals, alarm, gong, wine glass, soft-loud music...)
- Summarising, summarising, summarising
- Note taking (or harvesting, can be delegated if there is someone else available).

Using a combination of individual reflections, dialogues, triads, breakouts and circles, you can design a whole range of participatory processes. When combining different conversation forms together, think about what kind of conversation is most appropriate for the topic and the goals. Some need more contemplation or intimate sharing, others more active and unifying conversations, some can benefit from having all the forms above, put together in a coherent flow.

¹. [/integral_futures](#)

Individual contemplation

A few minutes of individual contemplation is important when the topics discussed are complex or emotionally charged. It allows people to examine their thoughts and their intuitions, so that they tend to come up with more considered, honest answers. It invites reflection on people's personal motivations, as well as connect with the motivations of others in the group. For the latter to work well it is required to report from the monologues to the whole group. Clustering the answers into common themes connects individual thoughts and feelings to create a sense of belonging to a collective endeavour.

Posing a question and allowing a few minutes for thinking about the question, taking notes and composing one's thoughts can substantially deepen the group conversation. Furthermore, individual contemplation allows the more quiet people to formulate their answers before speaking. While many group facilitation techniques favour extroverted conversations, this one provides a safe haven for those who prefer quiet reflection and solitude (e.g. "introverts"), whose voice should not be forgotten.

The individual contemplation can be used at any moment in a workshop, but works particularly well in the beginning (to connect the participants own experience with the topic of conversations), middle (as a 'breathing space' after expansive, high paced conversations in larger groups) and at the end (a moment of quiet reflection).

The individual contemplation can be conducted in any type of space. The only materials you need is a piece of paper and a pen for every participants. If you want people's written answers to be posted on a shared wall and clustered into themes, you might consider using post-its or other sticky notes that will allow you to easily move them around.

- Step 1: Frame the exercise and pose a question and provide the writing materials for every participant. Inform the participants that the answers will be shared with the group, and that the goal is to create a collective map.
- Step 2: Instruct the participants to reflect on the question for a few minutes, write down one or more answers. If you are using post-its, instruct the participants write one answer per post it, as clearly as possible.
- Step 3: Look around and sense when most people have nearly completed the exercise. Give the group another minute to finish up.
- Step 4: Invite the participants to report the answers from their monologue. This can be done using any of the conversation formats below. While the participants report, you (or a volunteer from the group) can cluster the answers into an affinity map².
- Step 5: Reflect on the result and invite additions or comments from the group.

Dialogue

A dialogue in a pair can be experienced as the most intimate, but also demanding type of conversation. Both participants have to be active (either speaking or listening), so no 'drifting' is possible (unless you want to offend your conversation partner). In a dialogue there isn't much time to reflect, the flow of the conversation tends to be more important. Furthermore, in a participatory session there is usually some time pressure, which can make deep conversations difficult. However, a dialogue is much less daunting for introverted participants than a conversation in a large group. The intimacy of a two-person conversation brings out valuable answers based on personal experience.

The quality of the conversation depends primarily on the listening and questioning capabilities of the participants. The more they pay attention to each other, the more interesting information they will report. It's important to note that some people find it intimidating to speak while someone else intently listens and doesn't offer their own thoughts, others are very sensitive to someone not paying attention. The listener should therefore try to sense what the other person needs. This is something that should be acknowledged

². [/affinity_map](#)

during the framing, after which the facilitator should let the conversations play out, with as little intervention as possible. After a dialogue it's interesting to let one person report what the other person has said and done. The report might include non-verbal information or other unconscious behaviour as well. If the participants know this in advance, they might pay closer attention to what each other are saying.

For a dialogue you need a space where different pairs can have a conversation without being too disturbed by the other people around them. If not much space is available, you can simply ask the pairs to turn their chairs or cushions towards each other. You don't necessarily need any materials.

A dialogue process can be structured in different ways, for example:

Interview:

- Step 1: one person speaks, the other only asks questions,
- Step 2: exchange roles

The value of this kind of conversation is that there is enough space for both people to speak, without the other person stepping in too much, except to ask questions - which can be perceived as encouragement and engagement. Because both participants take turns, they are aware of both roles (speaker/listener) and are more supportive of each other. A good example of this technique are the appreciative inquiry interviews³

Monologue

- Step 1: one person speaks, the other one listens and says nothing
- Step 2: exchange roles

A monologue allows a lot of space, but can be experienced as quite confronting. It is important for the listener to give appropriate non-verbal signs to show his/her attention or engagement. This form might work better with participants who know each other well.

Free flow

- Step 1: both people talk when they feel the need to and listen when the other person speaks)
- Step 2: Summarise the dialogue in a few key points

This is the most informal form and it is comfortable for most people. The danger is that one of the people might be dominant and talking most of the time. In this case the facilitator might have to discretely step in to allow some space to the other person.

- Step 3: Report. For all dialogue formats, the end of the exercise ends in reporting to the whole group and if needed clustering the outcomes in an affinity map⁴.

Triads

Talking between three people makes for an active conversation. The introduction of a third person in a dialogue creates a new dynamics that is less intimate and instead can be more energised and lively. Having three people increases the types of roles they can take - from listener and observer, to interviewer/interviewee, to conversation partner, note taker, etc. It's important to have multiple rounds so that every participant gets a chance to inhabit every role.

The triads need a space where small "islands" can be separated from the main group space (with or without tables or walls to write on). It can be helpful to have some surface to take notes on (e.g. a large piece of paper, black/white board), that is big enough for the three people to see and share.

Similarly to a dialogue, there are different triad forms possible, for example:

Questioning

³. [/appreciative_inquiry_interviews](#)

⁴. [/affinity_map](#)

- Step 1: one person talks, the other two ask open, clarifying questions
- Step 2: exchange roles
- Step 3: exchange roles
- Step 4: summarise conversations

Depending on the people and topics involved this format can be either very intimidating or very supportive. The key for this format to work is to avoid any judging or “interrogation”.

Observed interview

- Step 1: one person talks, one asks questions and paraphrases, the third one observes (and/or takes notes). The observer summarises the conversation at the end.
- Step 2: exchange roles
- Step 3: exchange roles.

Free flow

- Step 1: Everyone exchanges the role of speaker and listener. They can share the same working surface (paper, black/whiteboard..) on which they make notes and summarise the conversation.

As with the other conversation forms where the whole group is split into smaller groups, the exercise ends with reporting and distilling key insights.

Breakouts

Breakouts are a very common way to split large groups into smaller ones (4-7 people), in order to allow everyone to have a chance to speak and to have a conversation with new people. There are usually multiple rounds, where people move between different breakout groups (e.g. as in the world cafe⁵). At the end all breakout groups have a chance to report their conversations to the whole group and a synthesis of all conversations is made. The benefit of breakout groups is the diversity of dynamics that can be experienced by the participants. It's a good way to get many people to get to know each other and to have a conversation on a common topic, which allows them to learn of each others' opinions and personalities. It helps to have one moderator per breakout group, either pre-assigned, or volunteered.

Having breakout groups usually means that the group is larger than 5-6 people, so the space should be larger as well. It's best to split the whole group area from the breakouts, so that there is enough space to move around and have different perspectives on the room.

- Step 1: Frame the exercise concisely. Give instructions about the breakouts, the topic, etiquette, duration and format of the conversation, as well as the format of the reporting to the larger group.
- Step 2. Assign people to different groups: The challenge of breakout groups is to find a quick way for people to move into the groups without losing too much time and attention. If the choice of breakout groups isn't free, there needs to be a quick and easy way to mix people who don't know each other (colours, symbols, numbers, rows, pre-assigned randomised groups...). You have to be clear and concise in your instructions, to avoid delays and confusion.
- Step 3: Assign moderators : In a break-out group it helps to have one or two people to moderate the conversation, take notes and report back to the group. The breakout-moderators' task is the same as yours, but in a smaller group: they make sure that everyone is introduced and heard, as well as guide the conversation towards a meaningful conclusion, in a specified amount of time. There are (at least) two ways to assign the moderator/reporter:

5. [/world_cafe](#)

- pre-assigned. You and/or the organisers of the event can decide beforehand who should moderate and/or report from each breakout group. You can brief them before hand about the topic and some basic moderation principles, so they in a way become your ‘ambassadors’. This is useful if the topic is complex, you need to get to specific results, you need someone with specific prior knowledge, the time is short, and/or you want to be sure that the moderators/reporters have the appropriate social intelligence and facilitation skills.
 - spontaneous. This allows for more ‘organic’ conversation, where the group itself agrees on the roles, they ‘own’ the process and feel more engaged. The risk is that if the moderator isn’t capable of including everyone in the conversation, the loudest voices might dominate the group, and that the report might be biased towards the moderator’s own opinion.
- Step 4: Conversations in breakout groups tend to be free flow, or “brainstorming” (first soliciting information and opinions or generating ideas without criticising them, then selecting the most appropriate ones at a later stage). The questions and instructions are given again, usually in the form of worksheets that the moderators can use to guide the conversation. Your role during breakouts is to keep the time, watch the group dynamics and answer questions. You don’t get involved in the conversations unless invited to do so. The conversations can happen in one or more rounds, with participants staying in the same breakout group or moving between them (as individuals or as a group). The benefit of staying in the same group for multiple rounds is that the conversations gain depth and detail with each round. However, if the group dynamics doesn’t work, the conversations might not be enjoyable, nor produce interesting results. This can be helped by having the group move together from one breakout/topic to another, which at least provides a change of perspective. Moving individuals from one breakout to another creates new constellations of people for every round. This often leads to more dynamic conversation. However, it takes time for the moderators to brief the groups, for everyone to introduce each other etc. It follows that the conversations are likely to have less depth, but instead provide a range of perspectives and surprising twists. In all situations it helps to have a big paper (or other writing surface) on the wall or table of each break-out group, so that the participants can jointly note things down, observe and agree on the outcomes of the conversation.
 - Step 5: Reporting. After a detailed conversation, often in multiple rounds there is a lot of information that the group generates. It is therefore necessary to distill the essence of the conversation in a few short sentences. Usually this is done by the breakout moderators, who summarise the outcome of the conversations, sometimes with the assistance from the participants. However, if the moderators aren’t pre-assigned, it can be useful to have one person moderate and another report, to share responsibility and hear more voices from the group. Provide clear guidelines about how the conversation should be reported (e.g. a few key points, only conclusions or answers to the core question, etc). You can also choose to have a visual or physical reporting (a wall of notes and diagrams, or tableau vivant⁶ representations made by the whole breakout group. However you decide to do the reporting, you have to give every group about the same amount of time – which is easier said than done. Gently but firmly, you help the reporters get to the point and note down most important insights, that you can pool together from all groups and make a group-wide summary at the end of the session.

Circle

Whole group conversations are usually conducted in a circle or semi-circle, with or without a table in the middle. The benefit of a whole group conversation is that everyone can be involved and no reporting is needed. The format is well known, as conversations in a circle seem to be an old form that persist in many cultures worldwide. Round tables, elders’ councils, gatherings around a campfire, peace-pipe offerings etc. Sitting in a circle tends to slow conversations down and create space for collective inquiry, reflection and connection.

Note: be aware that some people may have a problem with the circle reminding them too much of group therapy, others may have a problem with tables, etc. – it’s important to be aware of what the group needs.

The space for a circle conversation should be sufficiently big to accommodate everyone sitting with enough distance from each other (be aware that the amount of personal space people need is not the same for everyone). There can be something in the centre of the circle – a table, or a centre-piece that links to the topic of conversation.

6. [/improv_exercises#tableau_vivant](#)

The process is simple: it's a moderated conversation where participants speak one at a time while the rest listens. The challenge of a free-flow conversation in a circle is the social dynamics in large groups: there tend to be people who speak longer and louder and others who remain silent. There are different ways to try to include everyone's voice in the conversation, and the choice of format depends on the topic and the circumstance:

- a listening circle: going around clock-wise or counter clock-wise, where one person speaks, the others listen and do not ask questions or add anything until the circle is completed;
- 'pop-corn' with a talking piece (a soft squishy ball helps people who are nervous about speaking, but anything will do): similar to listening circle but in unpredictable order, chosen in different ways:
 - people picking up a talking piece from the middle of the circle when they are ready to speak
 - the speaker offers the talking piece to the person they want to hear next)
 - facilitator or a volunteer pick names out of a hat...

A more complex form of circle conversation is the so called fishbowl: The inner circle (the fish) have a conversation while the outer circles (the bowl) listen. If one person wants to speak, they tap on the shoulder of someone in the inner group and take their place. The benefit of a fishbowl conversation is that it combines the intimacy of small group conversations with the large group setting. It breaks the sometimes stale dynamics of a circle by people moving between being speakers and listeners. There are different formats of fishbowls, sitting or standing, moderated or spontaneous, etc. Read more about fishbowl conversations [here](#)⁷.

References

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⁸. [/hosting_craft](#)

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