



# STRATEGIES FOR CURRENT CHALLENGES IN DIALOGUE FACILITATION

In these unprecedented times, dialogue is more important than ever and yet, it feels increasingly difficult to engage in dialogue. In this resource, we explore some of the common challenges dialogue practitioners have been experiencing and offer ideas, strategies and tools to address them.



## CHALLENGE 1: SPEED AT WHICH ISSUES ARISE & NUMBER OF TOPICS

### Showing up as:

- Multiple topics arise simultaneously or in rapid succession causing a constantly shifting and evolving context for dialogic spaces (social justice and human rights issues, natural disasters, global pandemic, etc.)
- Disagreement around what issue is "most important" and the belief that there is a hierarchy to the issues
- Feeling that certain people aren't allowed to take up space right now or weigh in on issues
- Being unsure of what to dialogue about when there are so many concerns. Should it be dialogue about just one thing, everything or certain things?
- Facilitators feeling like they do not have enough time to prepare to address newly emerging topics and issues

### Strategies:

- Making space for everything people are bringing into the dialogic space, grounding in what is happening, honoring how hard times are, etc.
- Emphasizing and expressing that these are unprecedented times and helping (student) participants understand this isn't normal and everyone is experiencing this totality for the first time together
- Utilizing intragroup dialogues to develop skills and tools related to dialogue before bringing different identity groups together
- Creating Anti-white Supremacy dialogue groups as an intragroup for white folks to explore power and engage with their discomfort
- Focusing on creating coalitions across social identity groups and helping people explore how they fit into different movements and spaces



## CHALLENGE 2: INCREASING POLARIZATION

### Showing up as:

- Lack of ability to agree about realities and to accept facts
- Increasing violence and the threat of violence
- People being unwilling to engage with people who have different opinions
- Participants being more hesitant to speak, increasing level of (self) censorship and fear of saying the wrong thing and/or being unsure if they can or should speak about topics
- Not being willing to agree to dialogue group guidelines and/or do not believe in dialogue

### Strategies:

- Naming that polarization is increasing
- Using videos during session about how technology platforms like Google and Facebook, algorithms and disinformation campaigns have contributed to increasingly insulated bubbles to facilitate dialogue about divisions (e.g. The Social Dilemma on Netflix)
- Reaching for the center, pulling for the middle (middle framing) and finding common issues people can still agree on
- Establish clear expectations around what will happen if participants do not follow the guidelines



## CHALLENGE 3: OUR VIRTUAL REALITIES

### Showing up as:

- Loss of informal processing space-- the informal engagement and conversations before/after group with colleagues to debrief, process and prepare
- Limitations of not having as much non-verbal communication and data to read individuals and the group as a facilitator
- Delays, lags and technology challenges
- Competing for participants' attention with multiple windows open on computer screens and more distractions

### Strategies:

- Create group norms around technology
- Embracing technology to enhance the virtual dialogue space to help increase engagement, to be more inclusive of different learning styles, and to help disrupt some of the traditional patterns of communication:
  - introverts v. extroverts
  - older v. younger participants
- Lean into the crowd sourcing nature of technology to quickly generate and brainstorm ideas and content
  - Eg. using Discord, Miro, Jamboards, etc.



## CHALLENGE 4: DIALOGUE FACILITATORS' DIFFERENT ROLES

### Showing up as:

- Struggling to find separation as a facilitator from the role of an activist and resisting the impulse and desire to persuade, try to convince or change minds
- Facilitators feeling exhausted and emotionally drained from their other work around promoting social justice, which impacts their ability to show up, be present and create a dialogic space

### Strategies:

- Embrace self-care for you as an individual and also as part of community care
- Ask yourself: What are you feeling right now? What do you need right now? What are you doing to try to take care of yourself?
- Relationship building: Connect with others engaged in this kind of work



## CHALLENGE 5: DOUBTING IF DIALOGUE IS APPROPRIATE, USEFUL OR HELPFUL IN THIS MOMENT

### Strategies:

- Diversify your approach:
  - Explore different models of dialogue including:
    - Start Talking
    - We Listen (political spectrum dialogues)
    - Intergroup Dialogues
    - Sustained Dialogue
  - Different approaches bring different strengths and strategies
    - Add new tools to your toolbox
    - Some models are intended to depersonalize issues to focus more on policy and structures, which may be more appropriate in certain situations
    - The facilitator's role is different depending on the model
- Get creative and incorporate alternative activities:
  - Incorporating mindfulness practice
  - "Me and White Supremacy" by Layla Saad
  - Bringing art into dialogue
    - Finding inspiration within art therapy
    - Theatre of the Oppressed