FACILITATING COMPLEX DIALOGUE

A Facilitator's Resource: Dialogue & Deliberation Tools, Group Level Assessment, and Question Protocols

Resources for helping students discuss complex issues with curiosity, care, evidence, and intellectual humility.

Dialogue & Deliberation Tools

Structured formats for exploring an issue together — surfacing perspectives, building understanding across disagreement, and, where appropriate, moving a group toward a decision.

Strategy	Description & Application	Source
World Café	Small groups discuss a question in rounds at café-style tables, with one "table host" staying put while others rotate, cross-pollinating ideas across conversations. Works well for surfacing collective insight on a complex or multi-part issue before narrowing to shared themes.	*Brown & Isaacs, The World Café (2005)*
Sustained Dialogue	A multi-session process (five stages: Deciding to Engage, Mapping Relationships, Probing Problems, Building Scenarios, Acting Together) designed to transform relationships across deep difference over time rather than resolve an issue in a single conversation. Adaptable as a semester-long cohort structure for topics students return to repeatedly.	*Saunders, A Public Peace Process (1999); Sustained Dialogue Institute*
Structured Academic Controversy (SAC)	Pairs research and argue one side of a "should" question, then switch sides to argue the opposite, before dropping advocacy and working toward a consensus position supported by evidence. Depersonalizes contested topics because students are assigned a position rather than defending their own.	*Johnson & Johnson, University of Minnesota*
Deliberative Polling	A representative group is surveyed on an issue, given balanced briefing materials, deliberates in small and large groups with competing experts, then is polled again to see how informed deliberation shifted views. Useful for teaching how considered judgment differs from snap opinion.	*Fishkin, Center for Deliberative Democracy, Stanford University*
Open Space Technology	Participants generate the agenda themselves at the outset, proposing and self-selecting into breakout sessions on questions they care about most. Well suited to conference-style class sessions or end-of-unit "unconference" days where student-generated questions drive the agenda.	*Owen, Open Space Technology: A User's Guide (1997)*
Conversation Café	A simple hosted-conversation format using a talking object, an opening round where each person speaks uninterrupted, open conversation, and a closing round. Its light structure makes it a low-prep way to open discussion of a sensitive or emotionally charged topic.	*Conversation Café network (Vicki Robin, Susan Partnow, and collaborators)*
National Issues Forums (NIF)	Participants work through a nonpartisan issue guide that frames a public problem as several distinct approaches, each with its own trade-offs, then deliberate on the trade-offs rather than debating for or against a single fix. Strong model for teaching that policy problems rarely have one "correct" side.	*Kettering Foundation; Mathews & McAfee, Making Choices Together (2002)*

Strategy	Description & Application	Source
Public Conversations Project Dialogue (RSVP model)	A facilitated format for polarized topics built on Respect, Suspending certainty, Voice (uninvited and invited), and Practice — participants agree to ground rules, answer reflective (not debate) questions, and listen for the values under a position rather than rebutting it.	*Chasin, Herzig, Roth, and colleagues, Public Conversations Project*
Chalk Talk (Silent Discussion)	A wholly silent, written discussion: participants respond to a prompt and to each other's comments directly on paper or a shared digital board. Equalizes participation for students who process more slowly or are less comfortable speaking up verbally.	*National School Reform Faculty / School Reform Initiative; also documented as a Liberating Structure*
Circle Process (Talking Circle)	Participants sit in a circle and speak in turn, often with a talking piece, addressing a shared question with no interruption or cross-talk. Rooted in Indigenous and restorative-justice practice; useful for building trust before tackling a difficult topic or for processing a difficult class conversation afterward.	*Adapted from Indigenous circle practice and restorative justice literature (e.g., Pranis, The Little Book of Circle Processes, 2005)*
Fishbowl Discussion	A small group discusses a question in an inner circle while the rest of the class observes from an outer circle, then the outer circle debriefs what they noticed about the discussion itself. Builds discussion metacognition alongside content understanding.	*Widely used cooperative-learning technique; see Brookfield & Preskill, The Discussion Book (2016)*
Philosophical Chairs / Stand Where You Stand	Students physically position themselves along a spectrum or at opposite ends of the room based on agreement or disagreement with a claim, explain their position, and are free to move as their thinking changes. Makes shifts in student thinking visible in real time.	*Adapted from Structured Academic Controversy and cooperative-learning traditions*
Liberating Structures (as a design set)	A collection of 30+ microstructures — including 1-2-4-All, Troika Consulting, and TRIZ — designed as alternatives to unstructured brainstorming or top-down presentation, each specifying how groups form, talk, and decide. Useful as a toolbox to draw individual structures from throughout a course.	*Lipmanowicz & McCandless, The Surprising Power of Liberating Structures (2014)*

Group Level Assessment (GLA)

A qualitative, participatory large-group methodology for generating and prioritizing shared understanding — well suited to a full-class session built around a real question with stakes.

Group Level Assessment (GLA) is a qualitative and participatory research-to-action methodology in which a large group builds a common base of data together, then interprets and acts on it collectively, rather than having data collected from them and interpreted for them. A single GLA session is led by a trained facilitator through seven structured steps.

Step	What Happens
1. Climate Setting	The facilitator establishes norms, purpose, and psychological safety for the session before any content is introduced.
2. Generating	Participants individually and silently generate written responses to a prompt, ensuring every voice is captured before group discussion shapes it.
3. Appreciating	Participants read and acknowledge the full range of responses generated, without judging or ranking them yet.
4. Reflecting	Small groups look for patterns, tensions, and themes across the generated responses.
5. Understanding	The group works to interpret what the patterns mean and why they matter for the question at hand.
6. Selecting	Participants prioritize the themes or ideas that matter most, often through some form of structured voting.
7. Action	The group identifies concrete next steps or commitments arising from the selected priorities.

Source: Vaughn, L. M., & Lohmueller, M. (2014). Calling all stakeholders: Group-level assessment (GLA)—A qualitative and participatory method for large groups. Evaluation Review, 38(4), 336–355; Vaughn, L. M., Jacquez, F., Zhao, J., & Lang, M. (2011). Partnering with students to explore the health needs of an ethnically diverse, low-resource school: An innovative large group assessment approach. Family & Community Health, 34(1), 72–84.

Classroom adaptation: A full GLA session runs 60–90 minutes and works well as a capstone or mid-semester "stock-taking" session on a course's central question. A shortened, single-step version (e.g., Generating and Reflecting only) can be run in 20–25 minutes as a lower-stakes formative check.

Question Protocols

Structures for generating, sequencing, and deepening questions — useful both for planning instructor questions and for teaching students to ask better ones themselves.

Strategy	Description & Application	Source
Question Formulation Technique (QFT)	Students generate their own questions from a prompt (a "Question Focus"), categorize them as open or closed, practice converting between the two, and prioritize which questions to pursue. Shifts the cognitive work of framing an inquiry onto students rather than the instructor.	*Rothstein & Santana, Right Question Institute; Make Just One Change (2011)*
Socratic Questioning Taxonomy	A six-category set of question stems — clarification, probing assumptions, probing reasons and evidence, questioning viewpoints and perspectives, probing implications and consequences, and questions about the question itself — for systematically deepening a discussion.	*Paul & Elder, The Thinker's Guide to the Art of Socratic Questioning, Foundation for Critical Thinking*
Costa's Levels of Questioning	A three-level framework moving from gathering (recall), to processing (compare, infer, analyze), to applying (predict, evaluate, hypothesize). Helpful for planning a discussion that deliberately escalates in cognitive demand across a class session.	*Costa & Kallick, Learning and Leading with Habits of Mind (2009)*
Save the Last Word for Me	Each participant shares a passage or idea that struck them without comment; the group responds to it; only then does the original participant get the "last word" explaining their own thinking. Slows down the impulse to react and centers listening before advocacy.	*National School Reform Faculty / School Reform Initiative text-based protocols*
Text Rendering Protocol	Participants each identify a sentence, phrase, and word from a shared text that stood out to them, reading them aloud in that order without discussion, then discuss what the pattern reveals. Useful as an entry point into a dense or contested reading.	*National School Reform Faculty / School Reform Initiative text-based protocols*
Harkness Discussion	Students sit around an oval table and lead a discussion of a text or problem with minimal instructor intervention, sharing responsibility for both content coverage and the quality of the group's discussion process.	*Phillips Exeter Academy*
Devil's Advocate / Red-Team Questioning	One or more participants are explicitly assigned to challenge the group's emerging consensus, surface overlooked risks, or argue the strongest case against the prevailing view before a decision is finalized. Guards against premature closure and groupthink.	*Widely used in organizational decision-making and policy analysis; popularized in intelligence and strategy literature*
5 Whys	Starting from a claim or problem statement, the group asks "why" repeatedly (typically five times) to move from a surface-level explanation to underlying causes or assumptions. A quick, low-prep way to push a class past a first-draft answer.	*Originally developed at Toyota (Sakichi Toyoda); widely adapted in root-cause analysis*

Sources & Further Reading

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