

Guidelines for Social Justice Conversations and Personal Growth – Listen Up! (WLA Learn Local, April 7, 2017)

This collection of guidelines, or norms, for discussion was gathered from many sources, starting with Peggy Erickson's adaptations of Glenn Singleton. Thinking carefully about guidelines and genuinely trying to understand them is valuable personal work. The guidelines are really about what we are trying to learn. Sources are listed at the end. ~Carrie Bowman, Teen Services Librarian, Mercer Island Library, KCLS

1. Stay Engaged and Listen to Understand

- Try to stay present in the room and pay attention to what causes you to shut down.
- Value the opportunity to listen. Everything is an offer, a chance to learn.
- Not everyone communicates in the same way. These conversations bring up emotions from past and present experiences. Try to allow others to experience emotion without shutting down. Don't take what people say personally and try to understand where another person is coming from.
- Be careful not to compare your experience with another person's experience, even internally. This can invalidate or minimize the experiences of others.

2. Speak Your Truth

- Remember that people are at different places with this work. Meet people where they are. In order to grow, it's important that people are comfortable sharing their thoughts and feelings.
- There are multiple truths and they all have value. Avoid generalizing and speak for yourself.
- Own your intentions and impacts. Respect others' experiences and feelings by taking responsibility for the effects of your words. Resist the need to explain. On the other side, if you have a strong reaction to something, let the group know and be open to dialogue. (AWARE-LA)
- Share the air space and give others a chance to speak. Don't interrupt. If you are not inclined to speak, give it a try.
- "You can't get to a good place in a bad way." Speak with the goal of new learning. Ask questions to clarify and gain understanding. Find ways to respectfully challenge others and be open to challenges to your own views.

3. Experience Discomfort – "Be comfortable with being uncomfortable"

- If you are not feeling any discomfort, you may not be fully engaged. (See #1)
- Allow yourself to be vulnerable. Meaningful learning can occur when we take risks.
- Sometimes we confuse safety and comfort. Safe conversations may still be uncomfortable.
- Stay present with the emotion and pain of others, and your own discomfort, as you listen.

4. Expect and Accept Non-closure

- Trust the process. Let go of control. Social justice work is difficult and ongoing. Having difficult conversations again and again fosters awareness and leads to change
- Be open to confusion. Sometimes you will leave a discussion with more questions than answers.

5. No Fixing

- Don't assume that you know best, or that you can help a person process their pain or discomfort. Trust that people have what they need to take their own path to learning and growth.
- If someone points out the impact of what you said or did, try not to explain or rationalize it. Sit with the impact and recognize that it is more important than your intentions.
- If you find yourself wanting to change or fix someone, explore what might be coming up about your own identity.
- Do your own work. Know yourself. Consider your biases and confusions around an issue. What are your sources of information and why do you value them? How have your experiences influenced you? Be open to mistakes, accept that you might be wrong, and be willing to change.

6. Appreciate and Acknowledge what people say

- Even when you do not respond directly or specifically, thank others who have spoken.

7. Confidentiality – Share the message, not the messenger

Sources

Thanks to Peggi Erickson for her Conversations on Racism (contact Peggi at peggi.erickson@comcast.net)

Glenn Singleton's Courageous Conversations <https://courageousconversation.com/about/>

Cultures Connecting <http://culturesconnecting.com/>

AWARE-LA (Alliance of White Anti-Racists Everywhere-Los Angeles) <https://www.awarela.org/>

Center for Ethical Leadership, Peacemaking and Healing Initiative <http://www.ethicalleadership.org/peacemaking-circles.html>

Cheryl Gould, Fully Engaged Libraries <http://www.fullyengagedlibraries.com/>

Teaching Tolerance: "Civil Discourse in the Classroom" <http://www.tolerance.org/publication/chapter-4-teaching-controversy>

PBS: Slavery by Another Name – Ten Tips for Facilitating Classroom Discussions on Sensitive Topics
http://bento.cdn.pbs.org/hostedbento-prod/filer_public/SBAN/Images/Classrooms/Ten%20Tips%20for%20Facilitating%20Classroom%20Discussions%20on%20Sensitive%20Topics_Final.pdf

TIPS for Success – Social Justice Conversations – Listen Up! (WLA Learn Local, April 7, 2017)

~Carrie Bowman, Teen Services Librarian, Mercer Island Library, KCLS

1 – Set Goals, not Expectations / Make it Local

There is no “best” or “correct” approach to community conversations. Develop goals for discussions with input from the members of the community (and/or your intended audience). Find out what the audience wants to know. Expect the goals to change and be willing to compromise. Sometimes people just want to be heard, or to listen.

- *Make it local with associated opportunities for donating, participating, or listening. Focus on what people can do at home or in their community to “be part of the solution.”
- *Connect to current or local events, people, or significant dates when possible.
- *Use local newspapers, newsletters, Facebook pages, and online discussion groups to publicize events. Find people to write about the events—youth are wonderful for this.
- *Plan events aimed at different ages to broaden the appeal of the topics. When planning a series of events, include different types of events (i.e., film, panel, presenter—many other possibilities).

2 – Panels and Panelists

If you have a panel of people who are telling their stories, then someone who has a similar perspective is best as a moderator. If you have a panel of experts, choose a moderator who knows the *community*. It is less important for the moderator to know the subject in this case. Teens are great for the role! Moderators need to spend time getting to know the panelists’ points of view and finding out what community members want to know. Send panelists the questions in advance so that they are prepared.

- *Invite each panelist individually. Encourage but don’t pressure people to participate.
- *Phone conversations with the panelists are fine for becoming familiar with their areas of interest or expertise and for letting them know what the goals of the discussion are. Better yet, meetings that include panelists, members of the intended audience, and the moderator are great for sharing perspectives, framing events, and creating questions for panel.
- *Encouraging moderators and panelists (especially students) to include personal stories adds depth and meaning to events and helps make them relevant.
- *An alternative to creating questions for a panel is to assign topics (and time limits) to the panelists and then give the audience a chance to ask questions.
- *Create a panelist bio sheet so that minimal time is spent hearing the panelists talk about themselves. This keeps the focus on the issues and the questions. Include URLs for their websites and contact information (with their permission).
- *Give the panelists name tags. Provide a table for them and make name tents.
- *Thank the panelists in writing.

3 – Establish Relationships with Community Organizations, Schools, and PTSA's

Developing relationships takes time and they require work to sustain. Teen-organized events take more time to set up than events organized by librarians! In my experience, community groups, churches, teachers, and parent groups are thrilled when teens step up to educate and advocate and the adults really want to support teen efforts.

- *Many organizations have outreach budgets and will happily participate. Ask about what they do, whether they have volunteer opportunities, and how the organization addresses the issues of interest.
- *Having school buy-in is really helpful. If students can make a connection between the event and subjects in their curriculum, more students may attend. Members of my Teen Advisory Board secured credit for attendance (and written reflections) for many of our events.
- *Working with the school curriculum, and including teachers in discussions about events, can lead to financial support for events (i.e., by purchasing screening rights, offering a venue).

4 – Film Licenses

Licenses to show independent films to the public vary in cost from zero to \$400, in my experience. Try contacting the producer! The license conditions vary, too, from one-time showings to life-time rights. Many film licenses include discussion materials and tips for organizing events. There are inexpensive, short-term streaming licenses available. Two companies I've used are ro*co films <http://www.rocofilms.com/> and the Media Education Foundation <http://www.mediaed.org/>.

5 – Discussion Formats

“Conversations are better than overly facilitated lectures by representatives from organizations [who can dominate, as we learned during one event], especially for films/topics that are controversial, or for which there is a lot of new and intense information. It seems best to have a discussion that draws out the audience rather than one in which they are mostly listening.” (Teen Advisory Board member, Mercer Island Library, KCLS)

- *Small groups allow more intimate conversations to occur and give more people a chance to speak. Groups larger than five or six experience fewer of these advantages.
- *Vary your strategy with small group discussions: give all or some groups the same question; give each group a different question; create questions that are related or follow from one another; give groups different parts of a task or question and then pull it together during a report-back.
- *Allow time for everyone to respond/add to each group's report-back for a richer discussion.
- *Written reflections are a variation to try as a group or individual activity.
- *In very large groups (over 50), it can be helpful to ask people to submit questions on note cards (i.e., during a panel discussion). This gives people who are reluctant or who want to remain anonymous a chance to speak; may encourage people holding a minority view to speak up; allows questions to be sorted and consolidated by topic and answered together; and prevents people from “taking over the mic.” A mic can also be provided—you be the judge. It depends on audience size and composition and on the topic.
- *For more sensitive topics, follow-up events led by experts allow people to continue the conversation in more depth. Panelists may be willing to participate.