

co·wonders



dialogue steps

dialogue steps

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What is it about:

- practicing steps of dialogue about polarising topics
- listening to understand and not to win or convince
- understanding the difference on three types of conversation (discussion, debate, dialogue)

source: dialogue and good conversation practice by Fundacja Nowej Wspólnoty (New Community Foundation - NCF)

domains: dialogue, communication over differences, empathy, conflict transformation

approach description:

“Dialogue Steps” is a tool inspired by the approach of the Fundacja Nowej Wspólnoty (New Community Foundation - NCF), which has developed and tested dialogue formats for people with different opinions, values and perspectives.

Diversity of views is the essence of democracy. However, when the differences become deep and lasting, they can be turned into division (into “othering” as opposed to “togethering”). Those growing divisions between people can be named as polarisation. Polarisation is seen as divisions that make conversation and cooperation more difficult, and erode our sense of community.

NCF proposes a remedy to growing polarisation: the good conversations format. They note that research shows that people’s ideological beliefs are largely fixed. Attitudes toward one another are more flexible - and the key to changing them lies in exposure to those with opposing views. That’s why NCF focuses on formats that bring together people who wouldn’t normally meet (source: NCF at a glance).

For NCF *“a good conversation is not about being right - it is about understanding each other.”* They note that dialogue is another name for a good conversation in the public sphere.

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Table below illustrates the difference among:

	discussion	debate	dialogue
aim	finding a better understanding/ solution of an issue	winning and convincing others to your position	understanding of each other
start	introduce the topic and gather ideas	share your position	share your perspective briefly and show openness to views of others
listening	listening to information that can help to understand the issue better	listening for weaknesses or points to challenge	listening to understand the person, not just their argument
reacting to positions	intellectual discussion, with challenging ideas and building on what others say	defending your position and confronting others	checking if you understood well
adding	ideas, examples, questions, alternative solutions	facts and evidence	personal stories
your position	changing when hearing a better argument	sticking to initial side	checking various perspectives
emotions	acknowledging them but trying to stay focused on the issue	being defensive or avoiding	acknowledging emotions and caring about the wellbeing of others and yours
disagreement	exploring why we disagree and what we can learn from the difference	trying to show why the other position is wrong	exploring the experiences behind our different views
example	a team explores how to solve a problem and find the best approach	politicians argue on television about which policy is better	friends have an honest conversation about their needs after a conflict

communication canvas

[inspired by 3 types of conversations by NCF]

dialogue steps

In dialogue, **no one is trying to convince anyone else.**

Dialogue is about finding possible common ground and sharing experiences.

NCF proposes 5 rules for good conversations (dialogue):

- the aim is understanding, not winning;
- the key is listening, not only speaking;
- it gives space to openly share one's opinions;
- it will not work without respect for differences;
- it requires looking for what can connect.

Dialogue does not erase differences. It makes it possible to stay connected despite them. And so you are invited to reflect over the question:

ENG: Do you want to be right, or do you want to stay connected?

PL: Chcesz mieć rację czy relację?

aim of use:

“Dialogue steps” is a method which supports navigating difficult conversations. It shows steps on how to talk about polarising topics without fighting or convincing others to one's point of view. It is a guide through the experience of listening to understand and to connect over what is common, instead of divide over what is different.

educational method:

- **Aim:** Present to the participants the background of the educational aim of the activity and its origin within the work of Fundacja Nowej Wspólnoty.
- **Structure:** Mention the structure of the method which is practice of steps in groups of (ideally) 3 people and then reflection over the experience in the whole group (plenary).
- **3 types of conversation:** Explain the concept and differences among the discussion, debate and dialogue, as well as 5 rules of “good conversation”.

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educational method:

- **Step 1 Forming groups:**

ask participants to form groups of ideally 3 people (potentially of 2). In the groups participants get to know each other by sharing answers to a simple question, like for example: “what is your favourite breakfast?”. Participants will go through all the steps of this activity in the same trios.

- **Step 2 Choosing topic:**

present to participants 3-4 topics (from handout 1 or tailored to the needs of the group) and ask them to choose the topic about which they would like to have a dialogue in their trio. Ask the trios for their choices and check how it was to choose the topic.

- **Step 3 Opening conversation + curiosity:**

this part of practice is a space to share the general position/opinion about the topic and to experience being heard by the others. Invite that each person in the trio shares their opinion, for example using phrases as:

- *My opinion is.../I do not have a position...*
- *What is important for me is...*

The person who is listening is invited to repeat with their own words what they heard other people saying, by for example saying:

- *I've heard... [paraphrase]*
- *Have I understood it well? [check]*

Advice for the part of listening to hear deeply, without comments, nor questions nor interruptions.

Invite participants in trios to assign letters A, B, C to each of them. Tell that in this part of practice person A will hear and repeat person B, person B - person C and person C - person A.

- **Plenary:** invite the whole group for reflection on:
 - how was the process of sharing and hearing?
 - which emotions did sharing and listening open?
(you can mention that acknowledging emotions can open space for vulnerability and connection, as well as can be a check if we would like to continue the exchange).

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educational method:

- **Step 4 Tell your story (exploring roots + hearing for values):**

at this part of the practice participants go back to work in their small groups. The person who shares the story tries to understand and share the roots of their position. This step is about opening up in a personal, authentic and emotional way, which allows us to see a human in the opponent (it is called: decategorisation and is one of the 6 turning points of dialogue). It can look like:

- *I started to think like this since...*
- *This topic became important to me since...*

The listener is hearing with the focus of hearing for the values and needs in what is shared, and can ask:

- *Was it about ... [name the values and needs]?*

- **Plenary:** invite the whole group for reflection on:

- *How did it feel to share/listen to a personal story?*
- *How was it to explore the values and needs?*

- **Step 5 Openness for other points of view:**

this step is about practicing empathy, getting closer to other perspectives. Is the invitation to share the doubts you may have about your own position. It can be shared by saying:

- *"In general I think..., but I may be wrong in..."*

- **Plenary:** invite the whole group for reflection on:

- *How was the process to share your doubts?*

- **Step 6 Looking for common points:**

check with your interlocutors what are the opinions or perspectives which you share. It can lead to building the category of "us" (called recategorization and being one of the 6 turning points of dialogue)). It can look like:

- *"We disagree on a lot when it comes to What do we agree on?"*

- **Step 7 Gratitude:**

invite all participants to share with their trios for what they are thankful for from the conversation. This step is a moment to express gratitude toward a person with different views. According to NCF, it is one of the 6 turning points of dialogue, which builds trust, warmth, and a sense of connection. It can sound like:

- *"I appreciate that..."*
- *"It was important for me when you said..."*

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educational method:

- **Debriefing in the plenary:**

as a closing of this educational method, invite the learners to share about the process of going through all the steps:

- what learnings do you take with yourself from the process of dialogue steps?
- what were the turning points in this experience?
- what can happen after the dialogue practice?
- how can this tool be connected to our everyday life?

Handout 1:

Examples of topics of conversations:

- Climate action: throwing soup at the Mona Lisa - does it support or harm the cause?
- Eating meat: necessity or unnecessary cruelty?
- Pronouns: support for people or unnecessary confusion?
- Family celebrations: saying honestly what you think or biting your tongue?
- Religion: a subject in schools or a matter for outside school?
- Artificial intelligence: hope for humanity or a threat to humanity?
- Migration: human right or national challenge?
- Sharing household chores in a relationship: a must or a choice?
- Gender roles: should we embrace traditional roles or move towards more modern ones?
- Restrictions on alcohol sales: necessary for public health or a restriction on the free market?
- Cars in cities: making life easier or making life harder?
- Your country: should we think more nationally or globally?
- Atomic energy: a clean energy solution or a dangerous threat?
- Political sides: healthy debate or harmful division?
- Mandatory military service: civic duty or unnecessary burden?
- Voting in elections: civic responsibility or personal choice?
- Waste segregation: real environmental impact or pointless extra effort?
- War: duty to stay or right to escape?
- Close people: family by blood or family by choice?

communication canvas

read more:

- **Website:** Polska Rozmawia (Poland Talks) - project on organising one-on-one conversations between people with opposing views - tips for conversations
- **Website:** Fundacja Nowej Wspólnoty - NGO in Poland specialized in fostering good conversation skills, enabling community and reducing polarization - on good conversation

