

What is a conversation?

by this we mean a good conversation

- By definition a conversation is “an informal exchange of ideas by spoken words” (Oxford American Dictionary)
- Involves more than one person
- A back and forth exchange of words and ideas – as soon as one person dominates it is no longer a conversation
- Conversations create something “new” through the exchange: a new idea, a new understanding, a new perspective .
- Involves the non-verbal as well as words (body language, facial expressions, tone)
- Implies an interest in others – their ideas, their worries, their stories
- Relies on trust and mutual respect among participants
- Requires a lot of listening

Conversations as opposed to

Dialogue

Deliberation

Debate

Chat

Discussion

Consultation

Presentation

Workshop

What is a public conversation?

Generally University of the Streets Café public conversations are two-hour events held in cafés (occasionally in community centres, art galleries, public parks) that are free, accessible and open to the general public. Each conversation focuses on a pre-determined theme and question, often conversations are grouped in a series around a particular theme, which each installment exploring a different aspect of the general theme, A moderator (responsible for the structure and flow of the conversation), a guest (responsible for 'getting the ball rolling' of the conversation by presenting his/her perspective on the issue at hand), and interested community members (all ages, all backgrounds) make up the participants of each conversation.

Once a guest has presented his or her perspective and the 'conversation' has been initiated by the moderator, the scope, content and various orbits and trajectories of the discussion is largely directed by the interests and intelligence of the group. In fact, the bulk of the two hours (usually about 1½ hours) is devoted to the larger conversation that is influenced by all present. In many ways once the guest has finished presenting he or she becomes a participant like everyone else.

Why conversations?

That is the big question! Why conversations? Why not lectures, or talks or even participatory workshops to explore issues? Because conversations put the individual, or in the case of a public conversations, many individuals, at the centre of the learning process. Conversations by their very nature meander along through the thoughtful presence of those engaged and may never end in a consensus, a resolution or even a conclusion. By creating an open space for discussion, each person is given equal opportunity to share perspectives, thoughts and opinions based on their lived experience and their own kind of expertise. By stressing that experience is a form of knowledge, then all people who remember and reflect on their experience are well-educated in that sense, public conversations push the boundaries of “education.”

Conversations are possibly one of the most powerful tools we have to change our reality and understanding of the world, because it is something all of us do everyday – we should be really good at it! We have conversations with our loved ones, our colleagues, our neighbours, with people we just meet. For most of us it is the informal (and sometimes surprising) conversations in our lives that have helped us shift our perspective, learn more and grow.

By engaging with each other in a public space at an inter-personal level we create bonds (even if only fleeting,) deepen our understanding of ourselves and of each other, and find a space in which to inhabit community. How much an individual is impacted by a conversation or what shifts in his or her thinking isn't easily quantifiable. However, it can be argued that it is in this unquantifiable space for individual thinking and collective reflection that empowerment, engagement and community are built.

Characteristics of a University of the Streets Café Public Conversation *along with a few assumptions*

They are free! Nobody has to pay or is directly asked to donate. A donation bowl is referred to and participants are invited to donate (this pays for schedules, printing, outreach, etc) but the 'hat' is not passed around and nobody is singled out to donate

Participants are not asked to buy anything: even if the conversations are held in cafés, we never promise a certain amount of business or income to the café owner. Most participants buy something (some buy lots) but it is not required to attend. We work with café owners to make sure conversations are scheduled at a good time for them (i.e. when there is less business like week nights) and get them excited about the idea. We never have to pay for a venue.

Conversations are punctual: For Montreal that means chronically starting at 10 past the hour. However we always end on time in order to respect everybody's time and to (hopefully) end on a high. It's better for people to stay, milling around and chatting than the conversation dying out and ending with "Well, I guess that's it, thanks bye" ☺

Public conversations are, well, public! As public conversations are held in public spaces, people come and go, some are in, some are out, little kids run by, cappuccino machines make background noise, people at the other end of the café talk too loudly – there is a limit to how much the environment can be controlled. We do ask café owners to turn off the music to help eliminate some distraction.

People are there because they choose to be: Even if a conversation is surely going to be amazing it's not a good idea to coerce people to attend. Each person present must choose to be there of their own volition

Attendance is hard to plan: Because public conversations have such an 'open invitation' format (public space, open to everyone, free) it can be really hard to estimate attendance – Since January we have everything from seven to 135 people at conversations. A good number is 15 to 40 people. It gets harder to have a conversation with groups above 40.

Topics are pre-determined: Better yet, we start with a pre-determined question. This allows participant to engage with the question (I agree / I disagree / I've never thought of that) before they even arrive at the conversation. It is also a good outreach tool because even if people don't attend they remember the good questions.

Topics are questions people can actually converse about and build on: Even though we occasionally have some really controversial subjects we try to phrase them and frame them in such a way that they can actually be discussed and not just create polarization, general outrage or a 'preaching to the converted' syndrome. However, some topics are just not appropriate for public conversations and that's ok.

People are smart and people are good: That is my basic assumption going into any conversation. If I am moderating that means creating the space for people to be smart and good without trying to be smart and good.

It's OK to start simple: Almost any topic we have at a public conversation could be the subject of a doctoral thesis. However it is absolutely impossible to cover everything in a two hour conversation – especially when only about 30 minutes or so of it is directed by the moderator and guest. The intelligence of the group *always, always* brings the conversations into deeper waters, looking at more complex issues.

Public conversations cannot be all things to all people: It is important to be clear about this. At the end of the conversation participants are not asked to sign petitions, join a committee or take an action – although they may end up doing all of those things because they attended a particular conversation. We refer participants to the guests and to each other if they want that kind of engagement. The objective is to create a space in which people can freely engage not shove engagement down their throat.

Conversations are not workshops: The intent is not to 'teach' but to allow learning to surface and it is disingenuous to 'stage' a conversation or steer it in a certain direction – which is different than bringing it back to the agreed upon topic, but it is up to the group to decide where they go with that topic.

Guests will veer off course: Even though guests only present for a short amount of time (about 15-20 minutes in total) they are an essential element to a public conversation as they get the conversational ball rolling with their response to the initial question. However it does happen that the occasional guest, even if well-prepared, will veer off course of the original topic or attempt to domineer/dominate the conversation. Moderators be ready!

Experience matters just as much (if not more) than expertise: Time and time again, it seems like the most successful conversations emerge when guests and participants share their experiences around a certain topic in addition to their expertise and opinion. While balancing the fine line between sharing and disclosure, retelling personal experiences allows for the creation of an implicitly safe space and the most memorable conversations.

Conversations meander: Most topics are so closely inter-related to so many other topics that it is almost impossible to not touch other issues. There is usually a sense as to whether the meandering is useful or not. Most of the time the group is self-aware and stays close to the topic but once in a while the moderator has to bring it back

Technology stunts participation: Probably the most frequently question asked about the University of the Streets is: Is it available online? We purposely don't podcast, webcast or record conversations for a few different reasons: 1) As soon as technology is introduced into public conversations it changes the spontaneous dynamic of participant comments. 2) Many participants will purposely not speak if they feel they are being recorded 3) Even when mikes are used (and the conversation is not being recorded) it changes the nature of how people participate.

Some people overparticipate: One of my colleagues at the Summer Program coined the word 'over-participants' a few years back and I find it to be spot on. Most of the time when people are 'hogging' the conversational space it isn't intentional, they are just really involved in the topic and have lots to say or maybe they don't often have a space to talk with others like this. Sometimes if the person is articulate and interesting it seems to be ok, but if they don't have the right tone or social skills or if they smell funny or whatever else it seems to not be ok with other participants. It is ok to tell both the interesting and not so interesting person to leave some space for others to speak.

Some people don't say a word and that's ok: Some people attend public conversations for the very reason that they don't *have* to talk. There are different ways of learning and engaging and it is important to respect that. We can create the space for people to talk but the choice is theirs. If we take that choice away it is no longer a conversation and putting people on the spot is just plain bad moderating. Participants are grown-ups and if they want to talk, they'll talk. And usually they do, either near the end or in small groups after the conversation

Some people are just plain difficult: But what kind of world do we want to build? My world makes room for all kinds of nutjobs, in some situations I *am* the nutjob. It is OK to declare certain *behaviours* unacceptable without declaring *people* unacceptable.

Safe spaces are created not declared: We can say a space is safe all we want but unless it actually *feels* safe and everyone feels respected and listened to and heard, it isn't.

Inclusive spaces are created not declared: We can say we create an inclusive space and everyone is welcome but that is simply not true. Even if we try to be super inclusive we are always being exclusive by virtue of the topics, how the questions are phrased, where the conversations are held, when the conversations are held, what language they are held in, how outreach is done. Beyond that many people will automatically self-exclude (I'm one of them) for all kinds of reasons that might not make sense to anybody else. I believe that we must try to create inclusive spaces armed with the knowledge that we most probably aren't but that we are doing our best.

Silence is not to be feared: [Long pause] It is actually a very useful tool to elicit participation, much better than inane or repetitive questions from the moderator. Some people simply hate silence, for others it gives them the extra time they need to raise their hand.

Conversations are an exercise in letting go: Once the topic is determined, all of the logistical elements are in place, the moderator and the guest understand their role, the participants are there and the conversation has begun it is time to let go, because conversations have a life of their own, they can be nudged in a direction, but they can't be tamed. Enjoy the show!

Questions for Flow-writing Exercise

We did not have the chance to do this exercise together. The purpose was to allow questions, ideas and concerns to surface in an intuitive way using the following instructions: You will have three minutes to write about each of the questions that will be posed. Simply put your paper and write for the allotted time. If you don't know what to write keep writing "I don't know what to write" until another idea emerges. Don't worry you will not be asked to share what you write. Don't worry about grammar, punctuation, spelling, just write!

What are the conversations you wish you could have in your own personal life?

What are the conversations you wish you could have with your colleagues or neighbours?

What are the conversations you wish you could have in your community?

What are the issues do you think other people in your community wish they could talk about?

Where are the physical places in your community that you feel people should be talking? What impact do you think that would have on your community?

What groups do you feel never talk to each other and really should?

How do you think public conversations could be useful to your work, to your activism, to learn more about issues you care about?

What opportunities do you think public conversations could provide?

What limits do you see to using public conversations?

What do you think would prevent people from participating? Who would not come and why?

What issues/questions do you think should not be discussed in public conversations?

Who is the one person (that you actually know) that you just wish you could have a public conversation with? What would you talk about? Where would you do it?

Logistical Elements of a Public Conversation *and some key questions to ask*

Theme/Question

- What are you really wanting to talk about?
- Is it too broad?
- Is it too narrow?
- Is there space to bring new ideas?
- Is the question loaded?
- Can people relate to it on a personal level?
- What types of people will it attract?
- How is the question phrased?

Moderator

- Why are you moderating?
- How do you relate to the topic?
- Are you curious about a topic or do you want to share what you know?
- Are you comfortable with the 'power' of moderating?
- Can you keep a hold of the reigns?

Guests:

- Why are you willing to be a guest?
- Are you speaking from expertise or experience?
- Can you step back after your initial presentation?
- Are you willing to engage in a conversation you can't control on this topic that matters to you?

Venue

- Where will your conversation be held?
- Is it accessible?
 - Physical location
 - Transportation
 - Disabilities
 - Cost of refreshments
- Are the café owners/people responsible for the space on board?
- How big is the space?
- How noisy is it? Can you have the music turned off?
- How welcoming is it?
- Can people sit comfortably?
- Can people stay after?

Date & Time

- When and what time will the conversation be held?
- Why that date and time?
- Who will be (or will not be) available to come because of the date and time?

Outreach

- Why should people participate?
- What information should people have ahead of time?
- Who will you outreach to?
- Do you want the conversation to be open to anybody, directed to a particular group or by invitation only?
- What technologies or mediums will you use for outreach materials?

Language

- What language or languages will the conversation be held in?
- Is translation necessary (or even desirable?)