

Living Room Conversations

Connecting Your Community Through
Conversation

February 27, 2024

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An initiative of the American Library Association Public Programs Office

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Conversations

Welcome and Announcements

- Today's webinar is a presentation of ALA's Public Programs Office with support from ALA's Cultural Communities Fund (ala.org/ccf).
- Visit www.programminglibrarian.org for more online learning sessions, programs ideas, and grant announcements.

About the Classroom



Microphones

Only our presenter has microphone access during the presentation. Live captions can be enabled by clicking on “Show Captions”.



Questions?

Save your questions for the end! We will be reopening the chat at the end of the presentation.



Tech Issues?

Send a message through Q&A.

Today's Presenters



Annie Caplan

Libraries Partner

Living Room Conversations



Jenny Garmon

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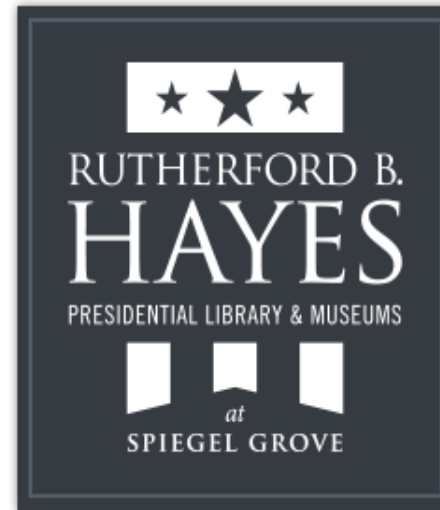
Agenda

- About Living Room Conversations
- What community conversations can look like
- Why libraries are well-positioned for dialogue events
- Living Room Conversations dialogue model
- Why Living Room Conversations are best suited for libraries
- How libraries use Living Room Conversations
- Resources and getting started
- Q&A

About Living Room Conversations

Living Room Conversations is a recognized leader in the bridge-building movement with expertise in crafting effective and accessible tools for dialogue.

We work extensively with libraries across the country to help them engage their community members in conversation and civil discourse



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Community Conversations At Sayre Public Library

- Recipient of ALA's [Libraries Transforming Communities: Focus on Small and Rural Libraries Grant](#)
- Organized year-long series of community conversations and programs on racial equity and inclusion



Conversations Inform Community & Programming

- Community partnership
- Took notes from conversations
- Created and shared community narrative
- Conversations informed our future programming
- Changed and expanded book collection



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MENTIMETER

What conversations do you wish your community was having?

Respond on menti.com using code **63 70 09 2**
or scan QR Code



Why Community Dialogue in Libraries

Libraries are:

- Community Conveners
- Trusted Public Institutions
- Community Centers
- Accessible and Inclusive
- Most Democratic Public Institutions

“The library is an ideal third place to bring these discussions together. It is a fairly neutral place for a lot of people. Libraries are one of the only places where people of all socioeconomic types can be together. You don’t have to pay to be in the library. It is an ideal place for this bridge building we want to do.”

—Josie Brockman, Longmont Public Library

Heal Toxic Polarization Through Conversations

- Conversations break down barriers
- Practice communication skills & active listening
- LRC recommended by National Governors Association
- Film screening + conversation program
- Counter spread of misinformation



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Impact of Living Room Conversations



Fetzer Institute conducted an 18-month study on the effects of LRCs

LRC's immediate & long-term impact:

- Improved mindset & listening skills
- Better understanding of other perspectives
- Increased interest in systemic issues
- Humanizing of “the other”

Impact on Communities of Practice who hold regular conversations:

- Generated a baseline of trust across ideological differences
- Shifted power dynamics between different groups (us vs. them, powerful vs. powerless)
- Application of conversation techniques to other parts of life

Living Room Conversations

- Equalize power dynamics
- Focus on personal experiences
- Use shared norms and agreements
- Build short bridges first
- Highly adaptable
- Work for all library sizes & community types small & rural, large & urban



Living Room Conversation Model

- Plug & play format
- Groups of 4-6 people
- 60-90 minutes
- Simple structure with 3 rounds of conversation
- Build understanding, not debate or change minds



Conversation Topics — Identity & Belonging



Race and Ethnicity

What would a society that values racial and ethnic differences look like? What hopes and fears come up for you thinking about that society?



Gender

What roles have you learned about gender from parents, school, peers, media, faith? Which do you hold true? And, which do you break?



Mental Health

What is the impact of mental health issues in your community? Have you seen changes in these issues over time?

Conversation Topics — Issue Specific



Guns and Responsibility

What role have guns played in your life?

Where did you learn about guns?
And, what did you learn?



Abortion

Labels like 'pro-choice' and 'pro-life' often oversimplify positions and pit us against one another. Which, if any, gray areas have you identified within your own position?



Climate of Unity

How would you describe your relationship with or stewardship of the environment?

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Conversation Guide & Format

- Brief explanation of topic
- Introductions: Why We're Here
- Conversation Agreements: How We'll Engage
- Round 1: Getting to know each other
- Round 2: Exploring the topic
- Round 3: Reflecting on the conversation
- Closing: Feedback



Respect. Relate. Connect.

Conversation Guide: Belonging

Living Room Conversations offers a simple, sociable and structured way to practice communicating across differences while building understanding and relationships. Typically, 4-7 people meet in person or by video call for about 90 minutes to listen to and be heard by others on one of our nearly 100 [topics](#). Rather than debating or convincing others, we take turns talking to share and learn, and be curious. No preparation is required, though background links with balanced views are available on some topic pages online. *Anyone can host using these italicized instructions. Hosts also participate.*

Introductions: Why We're Here (~10 minutes)

Each participant has 1 minute to introduce themselves.

- Share your name, where you live, what drew you here, and if this is your first conversation.

Conversation Agreements: How We'll Engage (~5 minutes)

These will set the tone of our conversation; participants may volunteer to take turns reading them aloud.

- **Be curious and listen to understand.** Conversation is as much about listening as it is about talking. You might enjoy exploring how others' experiences have shaped their values and perspectives.
- **Show respect and suspend judgment.** People tend to judge one another. Setting judgement aside opens you up to learning from others and makes them feel respected and appreciated. Try to truly listen, without interruption or crosstalk.
- **Note any common ground as well as any differences.** Look for areas of agreement or shared values that may arise and take an interest in the differing beliefs and opinions of others.
- **Be authentic and welcome that from others.** Share what's important to you. Speak from your experience. Be considerate of others who are doing the same.
- **Be purposeful and to the point.** Do your best to keep your comments concise and relevant to the question you are answering. Be conscious of sharing airtime with other participants.
- **Own and guide the conversation.** Take responsibility for the quality of your participation and the conversation as a whole. Be proactive in getting yourself and others back on track if needed. Use an agreed upon signal like the "time out" sign if you feel the agreements are not being honored.

Question Rounds: What We'll Talk About

Optional: a participant can keep track of time and gently let people know when their time has elapsed.

Round One: Getting to Know Each Other (~10 min)

Each participant can take 1-2 minutes to answer one of these questions:

- What are your hopes and concerns for your family, community and/or the country?
- What would your best friend say about who you are?
- What sense of purpose / mission / duty guides you in your life?

Conversation Agreements

Be curious and listen to understand. Conversation is as much about listening as it is about talking. You might enjoy exploring how others' experiences have shaped their values and perspectives.

Show respect and suspend judgment. People tend to judge one another. Setting judgement aside opens you up to learning from others and makes them feel respected and appreciated. Try to truly listen, without interruption or crosstalk.

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Let's Try It Out!

In small groups, each take 2 minutes to introduce yourself and answer 1 of the following questions:

- Is it easy or hard for you to connect with others who were raised differently, or live and think differently than you? What have you seen getting in the way of that from happening?
- Are there people in your community you feel close to? What makes you feel close?
- What core values do you think Americans fundamentally agree on?

Estes Valley Library

Effort started in 2018 to “to build local capacity to engage in difficult issues more collaboratively and productively.”

- Engaged hundreds of residents in conversations on a variety of topics
- Positive response led to state funding for greater accessibility (childcare, translators)
- Monthly conversations are a collaborative partnership between the Library, Restorative Justice Center, and Law Enforcement
- Earned the 2019 Colorado Library Community Partnership Award



“We have seen folks who might not normally engage with one another come together to learn with and from each other. There's validation in being able to share your experience and hear about the experiences of others.”

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Boston Public Library

- Staff trained to hold ongoing conversation series and conversations for rapid response to current events
- Repairing America Initiative: Year-long series of community conversations to help bridge gaps that divide Americans
- After Roe v. Wade was overturned, held community conversation on abortion



“I chose the topic of abortion because of the recent overturning of Roe v. Wade. I felt it was timely and relevant and something that people wanted to talk about. We had differing viewpoints, but our conversation was still intimate and compassionate.”

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Kansas City Public Library



Feedback includes:

“It was a mix of participants a thoughtful conversation new ideas and perspectives. It felt like finding solutions rather than just complaining about the impact COVID-19 is having on the election.”

“With the listen first model I found common ground with a stranger and could talk about restorative justice”

- Started online in 2020, with a community partner, subjects included:
 - The American We Want to Be: Founding Aspirations
- In-person events started in 2022, again with community partners...and in 2023:
 - Restorative Justice
 - Re-entry and Recidivism
 - Politics: Can We Talk?

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Looking For A Partner?

- Listen First Coalition:
400+ organizations in
the bridge building
movement
- Join the Public
Institutions sector
group
- Participate in National
Week of Conversation
(April 15-21)



Community Conversation Tradecraft

Focus on Asset Based Community Development

- collaborate with a community partner to identify and meet community needs while sharing your own strengths and resources
- create a resource list to highlight your library's digital resources and physical collection as well as your own research
 - share the resource list in a wrap-up/thank you email
- use surveys to track your impact and ways to improve



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Community Conversation Tradecraft

In-person Tradecraft

- keep a budget in mind (virtual → in person)
- work with local vendors if you are meeting in person
- highlight your library spaces!
- bring books from your resource list to your in-person event
- create a spreadsheet to keep track of participants, meal choices, and to help you randomly assign people to groups - I like using notebooks for group assignments
- take photos and ask for permission to share on social media



Ready to Get Started?

1. Email annie@livingroomconversations.org
2. Schedule a free consultation call with me
3. Check out our [list of 160+ conversation topics](#)
4. [Sign up](#) for our email list

Thank You!

Q & A

Information Exchange



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