

Moderating Difficult Conversations:

How to Facilitate a Successful Discussion



Mission of the Vermont Historical Society

The Vermont Historical Society engages both Vermonters and "Vermonters at heart" in the exploration of our state's rich heritage. Our purpose is to reach a broad audience through our outstanding collections, statewide outreach, and dynamic programming. We believe that an understanding of the past changes lives and builds better communities.



Some of the Services VHS Offers:

- Vermont History Museum in Montpelier & Vermont History Center (with research library & collections) in Barre
- Support for local historical societies & cultural organizations through mentorship, workshops, site visits, and program opportunities
- Vermont trivia kit for rental, packaged program for lighthearted and fun community engagement
- Traveling exhibition program with panels and support for installation and programming
- Local History Gallery in Montpelier, exhibition space for local organizations available in 6 month rotations
- Annual daylong conference with sessions on relevant topics for small local heritage and history organizations

More information: www.vermonthistory.org



Mission of the Vermont Department of Libraries (VTLIB)

- Guided by [22 V.S.A. §601-635](#), the mission of the Department of Libraries is to provide, administer, and maintain access to information in a variety of formats to the three branches of State government, libraries statewide, the general public, and Vermonters with special needs; to support, strengthen, and foster new means for statewide cooperation and resource sharing among all types of libraries and government agencies; to lead a service of advice and consultation to all libraries, in order to assist them in realizing their potential; and to increase public awareness of libraries and their services.
- Inherent in this mission is the belief that libraries are essential to the general enlightenment of citizens in a democracy and that every citizen of the State of Vermont should have access to the educational, cultural, recreational, informational, and research benefits of libraries.



Some of the Services VTLIB Offers:

- Inter Library Loan and a courier system to distribute materials
- The ABLE Library, which provides services to the visually impaired and print disabled as well as state supported institutions.
- Reference services for state employees
- Consulting for librarians in the areas of governance and management, library technology, small and rural libraries, special populations, and youth services
- Certificate of Public Librarianship program
- Access to digital books, free online classes, and the Vermont Online Library
- Library trustee training
- Grants to librarians for continuing education and other projects
- Purchasing discounts for libraries
- Support for statewide Summer Reading Program
- Youth book awards

More information: <https://libraries.vermont.gov/>



Welcome & Starting

Outline of Today's Webinar



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Topics & Plan

- Setting the Stage: Tips to Consider Before a Program
- Agreements for Courageous Conversations
- Facilitating the Discussion: Tips When Getting Started
- But What About...? Thinking About Our Audience
- Additional Tips



Setting the Stage

Tips to Consider before the Program



Be Prepared

1. Anticipate that people will come to the program with well-informed viewpoints and high expectations.
2. Read the book in advance and take notes, including page numbers so you can refer directly to the text.
 - a. Choose passages that are relevant to understanding the overall theme of the book and that will help spark discussion.



Consider Inviting New People

1. Any given topic will concern different communities of people with different perspectives. If a community whose interests are relevant to or represented in the discussion are not regulars at your institution – consider doing additional outreach to them to invite them and make sure they would feel welcome and safe.



Welcome Participants

Begin with a word of thanks:

“On behalf of (your organization) and the Vermont Historical Society / VT Department of Libraries, I want to thank you for coming to today’s discussion of Paul Searls’ book, *Repeopling Vermont: The Paradox of Development in the Twentieth Century*.”



Set Expectations

We often think that people attending a book discussion or other community conversation know what to say and how to act in those situations, but assuming that can lead to friction later on. Here are some suggestions:

1. Lay out some discussion guidelines in specific, straightforward terms.
2. Tell everyone how long you expect to be together, and what your goals are.
3. You can also be upfront about your intentions to make sure everyone has a chance to speak.
4. This would also be a good time to make sure everyone's creature comforts are addressed – point out where the bathrooms and exits are!



Acknowledge Possible Conflicts

You can acknowledge that the book raises issues that people might have conflicting perspectives and strong feelings about.

1. Explain that we value the free exchange of ideas—and the questioning of those ideas—and you expect participants to treat one another with respect as this process takes place.
2. Assure people that they needn't give up their own perspective in order to consider other perspectives.
3. Be aware that not everyone comes to the conversation with the same knowledge base – and might not all feel welcome. Be sensitive to everyone's comfort level, and try to provide additional context when it would be useful.



Any questions or concerns?



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The Four Agreements of Courageous Conversations



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The Four Agreements

1. **Stay engaged:** Staying engaged means remaining morally, emotionally, intellectually, and socially involved in the dialogue.
2. **Experience discomfort:** Discomfort is inevitable when discussing a challenging topic. Divisiveness is more likely if issues are not brought into the open, not talked about. Dialogue promotes understanding across lines of division.
3. **Speak your truth:** This means being open about thoughts and feelings and not just saying what you think others want to hear.
4. **Expect and accept non-closure:** It is probably not possible in this forum to resolve all differences of opinion or perspective. Therefore, participants should realize that the discussion probably won't produce agreement or easy answers. But that's okay! Ongoing dialogue is required to achieve understandings and viable solutions that will be widely accepted.



Facilitating the Discussion

Tips to Consider when Moving into the Discussion Portion



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Facilitate Introductions

Ask everyone to introduce her- or himself.

Introductions can range from the simple—name and town—to more complex. You could invite participants to talk about why they are interested in the program, and what they expect to get out of it. Or you could suggest they mention a “burning question” they want to be sure gets addressed.



Start with a Provocative Question

Consider starting with a particularly provocative question, or one that invites participants to make a personal connection to the book. You may get lucky and have such a dynamic group that you never need the list of prepared questions. On the other hand, you may find yourself with a quieter, less forthright group who expects you to constantly direct the discussion.



Plan Ahead

Plan ahead with pertinent local issues or questions. You may be able to do some simple research, or just bring some recent newspaper articles to give people a practical grounding in the big ideas they'll be discussing.



Language

Be sensitive to the language you use.

1. Think about ways that you can make your language and phrasing welcome new audiences; one example might be when talking about families not to automatically assume that a family consists of a heterosexual couple and their own biological children.
2. Think also about the terms that you use that might be more technical, and give the context or explain them as appropriate. Some library or museum terms are not as universal as we think! (If you didn't already know what it means to "check out" a book, maybe you'd be a little lost if the term was just tossed around in a discussion.) Be careful not to tip the scale too far into condescending – try to read your audience's body language for understanding and comprehension, and respond to that.



But what about...?

Thinking about our Audience



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Unruly Participants or Constant Talkers

Be kind, but firm.

1. You might start by making a general statement encouraging participants to stick to the subject at hand.
2. Look for a moment to interrupt the participant gently with the question, “What does everyone else think?” Or try, “Let’s hear from someone who hasn’t had a chance to comment yet.”
3. For chronic repeaters or wanderers, try summarizing their point for them and redirecting the discussion. You could say, “Our time is short and we have lots to focus on, so let’s get back on track. Anyone who wants to continue that line of thought can do so after we are done.”
4. If all else fails, the facilitator should talk privately with the person at a break or after the program.



Interrupters

Counsel patient and active listening. When someone interrupts another person who is speaking, it is usually because they care deeply about what is being discussed.

1. You can intervene and ask the interrupter to be patient: “Please be patient, please listen carefully to what X is saying, then you’ll have a chance to respond.”
2. Or, “Please be patient and listen, let’s see if your point is informed or influenced by what X has to say.”
3. Or, since you’ve asserted some authority by your initial intervention, after X is finished speaking you can redirect the conversation by saying to the group: “X just said _____. Does anyone else agree (or disagree, or have a different perspective)?”



Silent Types

Silent Types. No one should be made to discuss if they prefer to sit silently and observe. But some people are just naturally shy and may want the facilitator to enable them to participate.

1. Try a “sweep.” Start at one end of the circle and ask everyone to answer a question. You can tell the group, “If I call on you and you’ve got nothing to say, just say ‘Pass.’ I’ll leave you alone.”
2. Pay close attention to body language, which can indicate when someone is agitated or interested by the train of conversation. Pick up on that and invite the person to speak.
3. If you’ve remembered (or jotted down) everyone’s name at beginning, you can invite shy types to speak in a more direct way. Most people appreciate this personal attention.
4. Ask someone who has not spoken if they can relate the topic to their personal experiences, so they can talk about their own life.
5. Don’t be afraid of silence. As one veteran facilitator notes, “letting the quiet ‘steep’ for a while can allow insights to arise, and can permit someone who is hesitant to voice an opinion.” Be flexible, adaptable, and ready to rescue the discussion when necessary, but don’t feel you need to pounce on every pause.



Facilitating

Keeping a good conversation going:

1. Use phrases like “how do you feel about...?” or “what do you think about...?”
2. Solicit responses to comments that someone else just made.
3. Ask participants to draw parallels to their own lives.



Additional Tips



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Additional Tips

1. **If a group is particularly large** or you're having difficulty holding a discussion with the whole group, break them into units and give them a question to talk about, perhaps giving different questions to different groups. Then bring them back to the full group and invite each unit to report.
2. **Ask for last thoughts, final comments, or unresolved issues.** Have participants changed their mind about anything over the course of the discussion? Use the "sweep" method to let everyone have a final say.
3. **Leave participants with something to reflect on or question.** In doing so, you may want to read a short passage from the book, or share a quotation or poem related to it.



Final Thoughts



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Community Conversations

If you're inspired to host your own conversation, great!

Head to www.vermonthistory.org/community-conversations for full details, including a downloadable program guide, which contains more tips for hosting programs and clear next steps to host a conversation around *Repeopling Vermont*



Thanks!

Thank you for joining us today!



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Please help us by filling out the evaluation email you'll receive shortly!

