



Planning a conversation – from scratch¹

Updated August 2004

The aim of this resource is to help people plan and develop a conversation that taps into people's personal concerns and engages with a major issue in society -and to do this in such a way in that people have a sense of genuine participation, learn from the experience of others and are changed in the process.

Preliminaries

Who are the planners?

Are you on your own? Or is there a small team of you? This whole process can be done by an individual, but many will prefer to work in a small team of two or three. That way you can take different tasks that play to your strengths, both in the planning and on the evening itself.

Choose a subject

The subject should be something of general interest or concern, not a specialism accessible only to experts. If something is of general concern then there will be a way of tapping into people's personal stories that bear on this issue and learning from one another. .

Choose who you are going to do the conversation with

The group can be any sort, church group, home group whatever is possible – but Agora is particularly interested in fostering **diverse groups**, faith and no faith, powerful, powerless etc

Planning a conversation is a complex task. What we are talking about is far more than getting a few people together for a chat. The effort spent in planning is key to the success of the event.

¹ These materials are produced by Project Agora, a company limited by guarantee, which is dedicated to creating new spaces in society for the highest possible quality of public conversation, the building of realistic trust and the seeking of vision. Contact Agora at www.agoraspace.org or email enquiries@agoraspace.org

Imagine the Conversation

The overall aim of planning is to **imagine** the event, not only how it works in process, but **how it works emotionally and educationally**. It is easiest to demonstrate this by working through an example.

So we shall work through the process taking **immigration** as the subject.

We clearly have something here that is of general interest or concern.

Let's try to imagine the conversation.

What emotions is this going to tap into?

What issues is it going to raise?

We may come up with a list like:

Fear, threat
Unemployment
Racial tensions
Loss of culture
Britishness
Terrorism
Scapegoating
Monarchy

Benefits
Understanding others
The underground economy
Gangmasters
Justice and mercy
Skills shortages
Demographic changes
Population density

So it's a minefield. That's good!

Now I would start to **collect material**. Watch news, read stuff, talk to people, check out how I see this and how others see it. Take a few weeks to do this – or do it as a team of people.

Earlier this year I collected a range of cuttings on this subject.

Eg

- A scurrilous article in the Daily Star, 'Asylum Seekers eat our donkeys'.
- Inflammatory statements about the impending 'invasion' from Europe as new countries joined the EU
- The tragic deaths of cocklepickers in Morecambe bay
- Information from Migration watch website

The purpose of this is not to make you into an expert on the subject who can hold forth to others. Let these things be a resource to you, to encourage your own thinking. And be critical. Ask yourself 'How is this story being told here?' What are the commitments that underlie it?' Is it fair?

These various reports become stories that you can use as facilitator in the conversation. The aim is to resource the conversation, enrich it, even provoke it, with these stories, introducing angles that may not be presented by the people there.

The next part of the process must not be ducked. You need to try to feel **your own commitments** on this subject and then **work hard to understand how others feel**. You may, for example, feel very strongly one way or another about immigration and asylum type issues. The big challenge to you as facilitator is to try to get to a place where you understand where those who differ from you are coming from. You don't have to agree with them, but you do have to work at understanding why they feel as they do and respecting their opinion. This does not mean that we are looking for a facilitator to become dispassionate or 'neutral'. Your passions and concerns should

and will come through as you lead the conversation. People will respect you for that and it will add to the process, as long as you are genuinely open to hearing the voice of the 'other'. Some people cannot do this. If that is you I suggest that facilitating a conversation is not your thing.

So let's think now how to begin the conversation. People are coming to the evening. They have deep feelings about this subject.

How do we set it up so that people are in a mood to listen to others?

I often **begin with personal story**. This gives people the opportunity to introduce themselves well to one another. As you hear the story of another they become real in a way that is hard to explain, but very powerful to experience. In a conversation on immigration I do this by asking them to tell something about the lives of people that they know personally that come from another country. These are the sort of people that the conversation needs to be especially sensitive to. If there are any people from another land present their stories should be particularly heard and respected in the feedback from this process.

This should help immigrant people to become 'real' and break open some of the more destructive stereotypes that are imposed on them.

A second key strategy for diffusing tension at the outset is to collect views around 'What do people say about this' List key phrases on a flip chart that summarise how different people in society feel about this problem. As you do this people will actually see their own opinion arise but they don't have to own it at this stage. It is at a distance. They begin to see the big picture, the range of views, the difficulties.

This is an obvious moment to share some of the stories that you have collected from your research as illustrations of what people say. The facilitator can use these to affirm or underline things others are saying or to add in another view that is not being expressed.

OK - so we have a way in to the conversation. People are in there, listening, and their views or some like them are on the table, together with the views of those who think differently.

So how are you going to handle it?

The role of the facilitator is now to enable the formation of a big picture into which all this can fit. It requires being able to think widely and broadly enough simply to sketch the outlines of the central issues. **This is not giving the answer.** It is most like trying to find the most general questions that embrace the subject. This is also the place where faith perspectives can be particularly helpful. This process should be continually checked out with the participants as it is done.

So, for example, in terms of immigration the facilitator might review the range of attitudes to the subject and notice that one set of people who are generally worried about immigration have a particular concern for the social order and to uphold all that is good in the culture. On the other hand those who empathise with immigrant peoples may themselves be people who generally challenge the social order and feel for the marginalised and unjustly treated. There may be something in their own story about being marginalised that leads them to this position.

So we see a general tension in a society between the upholders of all that is good in a social order who tend to be suspicious of change and those who welcome challenge and the change it brings. Immigrant people are widely perceived as

challenging society, potentially subverting customs and mores, yet others see this challenge as healthy, providing new opportunities and greater understanding of others.

In the immigration conversation I try to affirm this big picture analysis with a **revealing question**. This may initially seem to be off the subject, but it is designed to tap into similar basic human motivations. So I ask them 'What do you think about the monarchy?'

This question actually produces a remarkable level of passion and divides the participants almost precisely along the same lines as they divide on immigration. It points to the same tension between those who value and defend the social order and those who are disposed to challenge it. And so it underlines the tension at the heart of the immigration question.

This is also the point where faith connections can be made in the conversation. The Bible is full of narratives that bear on central human tensions and that derive from human nature itself. In a conversation the aim is often simply to offer some of these stories into the discussion, not to prove a position but to indicate the relevance of biblical narrative, the impact of faith on the society and so encourage a respect for the wisdom that can be derived from the scriptures.

In terms of the immigration conversation the tension between upholding the social order and allowing challenge can be illustrated by a range of biblical narratives. We see the upholders of social order in the priestly tradition, in writers like Ezra, Haggai, Zephaniah. We also see the challenge that comes via the foreigner in Ruth, or Jonah or from a radical prophet like Amos (eg Amos 9v7) We can show the same tensions in the New Testament as Matthew (in the Sermon on the Mount), Peter and Cornelius (in Acts 10) and Paul (in Romans) are intent on upholding all that is good in Judaism while allowing space for the massive mindshift necessary in admitting the Gentiles.

I have written more about this and other ways of making biblical connections with the issues of society in my book (Chris Sunderland *In a Glass Darkly-seeking vision for public life* Paternoster Press 2001

This generalising of the problem should help all the participants think positively about the issue, recognise that there are real and important tensions here and set them up to think creatively about solutions.

And to end?

The conversation could end on a practical note, for example, inviting the participants to draw up some broad principles on which public policy should be based.

Or if it had a faith focus then it may end with an inspirational faith piece. In the immigration context, for example this might include a recognition of Christianity as a faith that became explicitly for 'every tribe and nation and people and language'. (Rev 7v9)

There are actually many ways to end a conversation, but **one thing that should be avoided is any sense of giving the answer**. The issues that you are dealing with are irreducibly complex. The hope in running a conversation is that we all learn, including the facilitator. Practical outcomes, even political action may result, but that is not the prior purpose. Agora's aim is simply to provide opportunity for the highest

possible quality of public conversation, the building of realistic trust and the seeking of vision..

Group dynamics in a conversation.

We have discussed the content of the conversation so far, but the practical way that it is managed will also be of vital importance. One key aim is to give everyone a **sense of participation**.

People enjoy what they take part in. This can be achieved by running the conversation as an interplay between small group work in fours and fives and interacting as a whole group. One way to achieve this is to actually sit people round small tables in such groups, providing drinks, nibbles etc at each table. This gives symbolic importance to their group and its discussion. Alternatively people can simply move their chairs for the group work. The evening may have three sessions of small group work (of 5-10mins each), and each be framed around a question that will draw out something of their own life experience or story.

These will be interspersed with feedback and response orchestrated by the facilitator. The facilitator will take short feedback comments from the tables round the room.. Aim generally to affirm the comments made, sometimes underlining them with another story (eg gleaned from research) and occasionally offering a story in that offers a perspective not mentioned. The facilitator needs to be **vulnerable** in this process. You should cultivate an openness that does not control with a heavy hand but with an eye to the overall shape of the conversation. Some things will not go according to plan. A good conversation will be passionate and this may be uncomfortable. Your role is to **keep the conversation open**. Do not allow anyone to close it down with a simplistic catch-all answer. Insist that everyone is spoken of with a degree of **respect**. Facilitating a conversation well is something of an art, but preparation is of the essence. If you have thought through the sort of things that will come up, you will also be ready for the difficult voice and know how to qualify or challenge their remark. Remember that, as facilitator, the participants will be looking to you **to prevent any one particular person dominating** so have no conscience about attending to this task. Weak leadership in this sense will make for anxious and difficult behaviour by many. Having said that I find that facilitating these conversations is actually great fun, even if you feel a little ragged afterwards!

Become a storyteller!

Nothing stimulates a discussion better than stories. Some will arise from the participants' own life experience, but if the facilitator (or another member of the team) is able to tell stories, then this will be a great asset. What you should aim to do is to find stories that relate to the conversation. Some may arise from your research. Some may be faith stories, poems or music. One of the exciting things about a conversation is that it is live, face to face and therefore exciting and unpredictable. This same atmosphere should surround the storyteller. A story that is told is *far* more interesting than one that is read. Also stuff that is read can come over as too authoritative, closing down on the life stories of the participants etc, making those feel second rate. This is particularly true of faith stories. Telling a Bible passage is often far more helpful than reading it.

(for an introduction to storytelling and Bible telling try www.thetellingplace.org)

Working with special guests

Some conversations will benefit from a guest with some special experience or expertise. If you go down this route, **be careful!** If you invite a guest, they will expect

to lecture and then take questions. This is usually a disastrous educational model. It gives almost all the power to the expert and leaves everyone else feeling frustrated most of the time. Instead you should engage with just enough expertise to give the conversation credibility – but not so much as to disempower the participants. This means that you must retain operational control of the event and the guest speaker should be primed beforehand what to expect, given a strictly limited brief, say 10 mins input and 'question and answer' sessions generally avoided or subsumed into a more participative mix as we have described.

Working with small groups

Moving between small groups and the larger group works well with groups of between 12 and 70 people. It will feel strange in smaller groups. It may be that you want to work from a home and smaller numbers will be more appropriate. In these circumstances you will need to run the conversation throughout as one group and this is a slightly different art. You may naturally feel that there is less need to prepare. You may think 'informality is best' and miss out on seriously imagining what will happen. The danger is that the informal environment will result in losing the structure of the conversation and you will be led down seriously unhelpful byways. Alternatively you may race through your material or even lose direction entirely. One way to counteract this is to provide particular points of interest through the conversation. Some of our resources suggest using film clips to stimulate conversation. Alternatively you could prepare a particular story to tell part way through. Otherwise the same general points apply.

Other practical points

Venues do things to people. Put people in a new, interesting space and they will think new thoughts. Put them where they are used to a certain way of thinking and behaving and they are likely to fall into that pattern. I have often used function rooms in pubs or cafes, but if that is a bridge too far for your group then use the familiar hall, but why not tart it up a bit? Serve special drinks refreshments, lighting, small tables, ambient music at the start etc. Everything you do will help people feel that this event is a bit special. They will feel honoured and ready to listen.

Keep an eye to the time. I generally use 1 1/4 hours – 1 1/2 hours for a conversation. Sometimes it is helpful part way through to tell people what the end time is. Then stick to it (or within 5 mins of it). It all gives confidence to the participants.

The overall tasks in planning and leading a conversation can be usefully subdivided in your team of two or three. One may not fancy being facilitator but feel very able to do research. Another might prepare some stories to tell that bear on the subject. Someone else might organise the admin and the venue.

A set of resources is now available on our website (www.agoraspace.org) that are designed around key issues in today's society.

For example, you can find a resource there titled 'Immigration – threat or opportunity' which shows in more detail how this particular example might work out.

There are also many others. Each has three or more questions that can be used in small groups. Ideas for other resources and stories, faith connections and much more. And, of course feel free to design your own. The purpose of this resource is to enable you to do just that. If it goes well please let us know. We are very keen to broadcast ideas and good practice through the website.