

How to Run a Dialogues Club (H2RADC)

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Starting Up

There are a few simple steps to establishing a Dialogues Club at your school:

- Finding supports: enthusiastic teachers or students
- Understanding how: read H2RADC (you are!) and other [resources](#)
- Organise your first meeting: time, place, topic, speakers and target audience
- Advertise: use Dialogues Club [marketing resources](#) [add link straight to anchor/bookmark to marketing section on Resources page when completed] to attract participants

Meetings

Essentials for a Dialogues Club event:

- Quiet, congenial space - indoor or out
- Two or more students with different perspectives
- Chairperson/moderator

Extra features of a Dialogues Club event could be:

- An audience
- Teacher and/or other students to help organise and promote
- External guests, including moderators
- Recording - notes, video, audio

Sample Run Sheet

For a regular lunch-time discussion group with a small panel, a meeting run sheet might be (assuming a 45-minute window):

11:30 - Set up and entry

11:35 - Chairperson introduces topic and speakers

11:37 - Opening remarks from panellists

11:40 - Moderated discussion among panellists

11:55 - Open discussion to the floor

12:05 - Close dialogue and return to chairperson - invites suggestions for future topics

12:10 - Close meeting & pack up

Formats

As suggested, the simplest format for a Dialogues Club meeting requires just two speakers and a chair or moderator. Speakers should have conducted some preliminary research to come to opinions of their own, on a topic chosen prior to the meeting. From here:

- Moderator introduces speakers and topic
- Speakers share their main thoughts and findings
- Moderator guides conversation to help speakers identify key points of contention and agreement

However, a meeting could take many forms to suit varying numbers of participants. Alternative formats include:

- 4-10: Share stimulus material (videos, prepared statements, etc) and discuss openly
- 10-20: Panel dialogue with 3-5 speakers and open discussion; 20+: Prepared panel dialogue, guest moderators or speakers, etc
- Other formats you can come up with which are conducive to dialogue and appropriate for the number of participants

Ideally, every meeting would include a brief recap of the discussion by the moderator or someone else appointed to do it. You might choose to conclude your meetings with a call for potential topics or activities for future events.

Topics

Choosing a topic takes some thought. It should be an issue contentious enough to be worth discussing, yet with enough scope for agreement that speakers can find points on which they agree and modify their views. Examples of topics include:

- Recent news stories highlighting emerging issues, such as:
 - What should be done about vaping in schools?
 - Who is responsible for students' mental health?
- Dilemmas and issues from class discussions, such as:
 - From English class, how a character's actions might be justified or not
 - From history class, how a leader or a group could have resolved a situation
- Broader societal issues, such as:
 - How best to address indigenous disadvantage?
 - Is our generation better off than the last?

Moderating Discussions

Dialogues Clubs provide a great opportunity to develop valuable moderating skills, for both students and teachers, e.g.:

- Establishing an atmosphere of civility, curiosity and respect
- Maintaining a neutral position
- Treating speakers fairly and equally
- Keeping the discussion moving
- Developing techniques and confidence to defuse any emotional situations
- Following arguments and identifying potential common ground as well as key points of difference

You will find useful guides and tips in [Resources](#). Practice makes perfect!

Principles of Dialogue

Here are some pointers for healthy dialogue, arguably humanity's greatest distinguishing feature - the mechanism for collaboration which counters our adversarial instincts, producing solutions and progress!

The Brisbane Rule¹:

"All participants agree to listen carefully, speak respectfully and concentrate on the content of discussions, not on characters - before, during and afterwards, online as well as offline."

The Principle of Charity²:

In philosophy and rhetoric, the principle of charity or charitable interpretation requires interpreting a speaker's statements in the most rational way possible and, in the case of any argument, considering its best, strongest possible interpretation.

Rapoport's Rules³:

- Restate your opponent's argument as well as you can ("steel man" it)
- Note anything new learnt
- Note points of agreement, if any
- Then, and only then, criticise or oppose

Dialogue Vs Debate:

Dialogue is not debate. There are important differences:

Dialogue	Debate
Speakers aim to explore complex issues to find points of agreement and acknowledge points of disagreement	Speakers aim to defeat the arguments of their opposition
Speakers talk about their own opinion on the matter	Speakers argue for or against a position based on what they are assigned
Speakers talk to each other in a conversational format	Speakers speak in a rigid, one-way format which focuses on argumentation over discussion
Speakers can occupy "grey areas" where it isn't clear if they are in favour of something or against it	Speakers are divided into two teams and must clearly be for or against something
Speakers are allowed to acknowledge things they like about the positions of other speakers and seek to incorporate their ideas into their own perspective	Speakers cannot change their mind and must attack the arguments of others to "win".

¹ Written for the launch of The Brisbane Dialogues, Mar 2020

² Wikipedia article "[Principle of charity](#)"

³ Various sources, [for example](#)

Elements of Dialogue in Aboriginal Culture⁴

1. Sit under a tree, or around the campfire: gather in a congenial place for discussion.
2. Listen carefully. "Deep listening" ("dadirri") was inculcated in upbringing, presumably reflected in adult councils.
3. "Walk together", literally: move between physical environments if the discussion becomes heated or difficult - break negative energy, work through stubborn differences and seek common ground to go forward from. More directly: "walk and talk".
4. Reaching resolution on important subjects takes as long as it takes. The process is more important than the destination, or any particular issue.
5. There is no chief, or ultimate authority; however some have more knowledge and authority and are better at dialogue. Inner councils of elders form organically. These can vary depending on the subject.
6. Agreement is not always possible. Decisions are not necessarily a broad consensus, more like the group of elders making judgments about how to maintain cohesion, or making everybody as happy as possible.
7. Dialogue and resulting decisions reflect the serious obligations of members to the community, together with rights.
8. Decisions are respected and implemented. Matters under discussion and decision were sometimes serious and personal, so the decision process had to be respected if escalation was to be avoided and resolution reached.

Relevant Quotes

The aim of argument, or of discussion, should not be victory, but progress.

Joseph Joubert

Change happens by listening and then starting a dialogue with the people who are doing something you don't believe is right.

Jane Goodall

If children just left school realising that once they've thrown an insult, they've lost, they're not going to convince the other person, they've withdrawn themselves from the argument, then the world would be an infinitely better place, wouldn't it?!

Andrew Doyle

Dialogue is the foundation of civil discourse and the cornerstone of democracy.

Jane Eisner

I've come to believe that given the plethora of very difficult issues that confront us as a nation, as a culture, as a people, our greatest problem is that we can no longer debate any of them reasonably and rationally and calmly without emotion, without hatred.... We have to do better. We owe it to our children and grandchildren.

Hon John Anderson AC

He who knows only his own side of the case, knows little of that." J.S. Mill

⁴ Discussions with Wesley Aird and Lloyd Hancock, Feb-Jul 2020