

Courageous Dialogues:

Bridging Divides in Polarized Times

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Project Overview

Y1

- Literature Review & Annotated Bibliographies
- Surveys

Y2

- Environmental Scan
- Community Learning Circles
- Participatory Research

Y3

- Interactive “road map” of resources
- Curriculum

Project Overview

Research Team



What is polarization?

Polarization is a **complex social dynamic** that occurs when an issue that involves many different people, concerns, and opinions is reduced to **two opposing sides**- "for or against", "us vs them".

De-polarization is **not**...

- Neutrality
- Saying that the point between two extremes is always correct
- A substitute for other types of social change work

Polarization 101: The Basics

The characteristics of polarization

- Polarization is characterized by both over-simplification and oppositionality.
- Five features common to polarized environments (Brubaker et al., 2019):

Personal attacks

Describing
conflicts in
epic terms

Distorted
information

Relentless
obsession

Intractable
negotiations

What we *cannot* achieve through de-polarization alone

- Changing the fundamental drivers and accelerators of polarization (algorithms of social media)
- Changing societal structures (bringing about greater economic equality)
- Changing the minds of those at the most extreme and dismissive edges/poles (Loretta J. Ross)
- Changing others who aren't also ready to engage differently
 - It takes two to tango (but one *can* lead)

What we *may* be able to achieve through de-polarization

- Redirecting social energy
 - Establishing new norms for interaction that are more life-affirming
- Benefits to democracy:
 - Repopulating the political map with more potential positions, views, nuance
 - Re-engaging those who are cautious, doubtful, alienated by polarization, or just open to learning from each other
 - Getting fuller and more constructive civic engagement, leading to more robust solutions to social problems
- Fuller, richer lives for us all (Ripley, 2022)

Overcoming polarization: Capacities needed

- **Effective Listening**
 - From downloading to factual to empathic to generative (Otto Scharmer, Theory U)
 - Constructive communication cycle - Listen-Reflect-Speak-Ask (Essential Partners)
- **Pluralism and moral courage** (David French, Irshad Manji)
- **Empathy** (Jonathan Haidt) (and many others!)
- **Intellectual humility** (Porter & Schumann; Stanley, Sinclair & Seli)
 - “a willingness to recognize the limits of one’s knowledge and appreciate others’ intellectual strengths”
- **Curiosity**
- **Conflict resilience & stress tolerance**
- **Tolerance for complexity and ambiguity**
- **Vulnerability**
- **Ingenuity & meaning-making** (co-creating and reimagining meaning)

Courageous dialogues can make a difference

- Research shows that dialogue can reduce affective polarization and increase trust, respect, understanding and willingness to work together

Activity: Dialogue and Debate

- Review goals of dialogue; goals of debate
- Identify situations which benefit from dialogue and/or debate

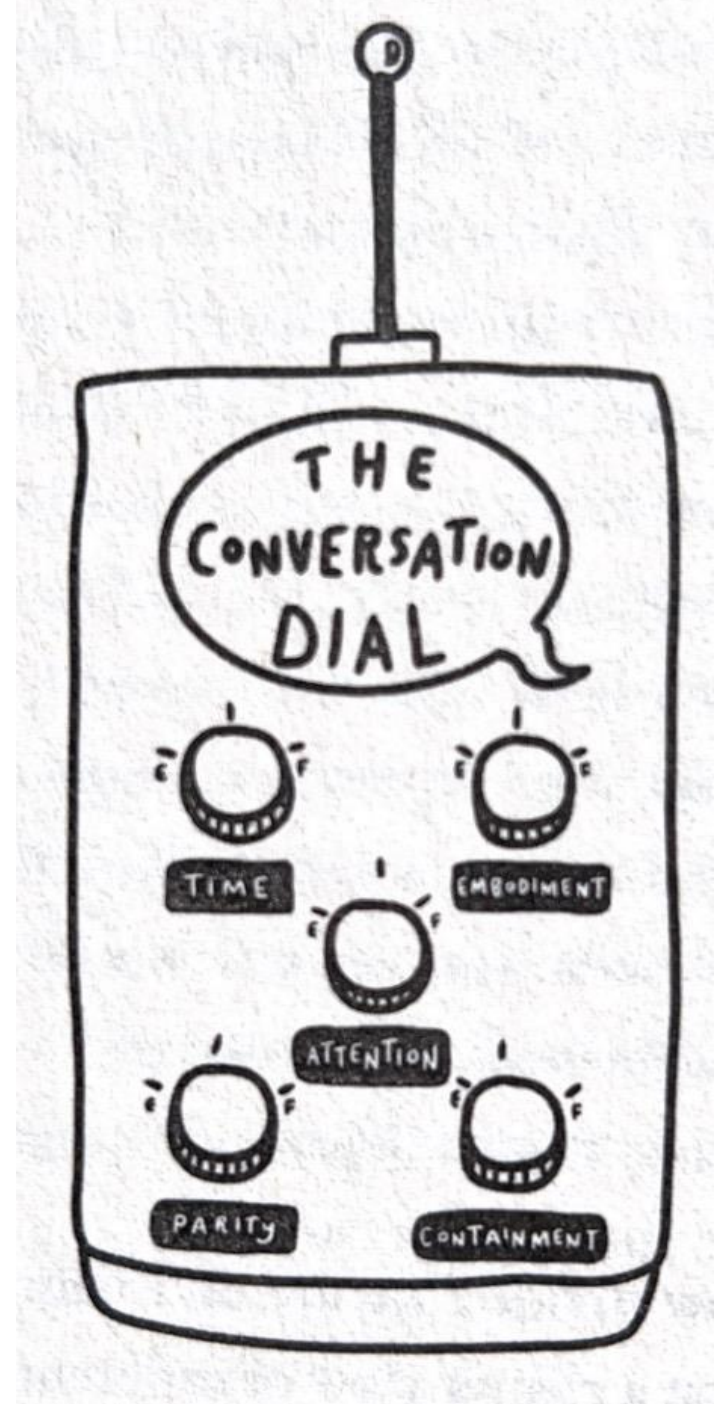
Activity: Knowing your intentions

- Review goals of dialogue and goals of debate checklist.
- Think of issue, concern, conflict that needs your attention.
- What are your goals, intentions, and expectations in that engagement? Self-inquiry
- Think > pair > share

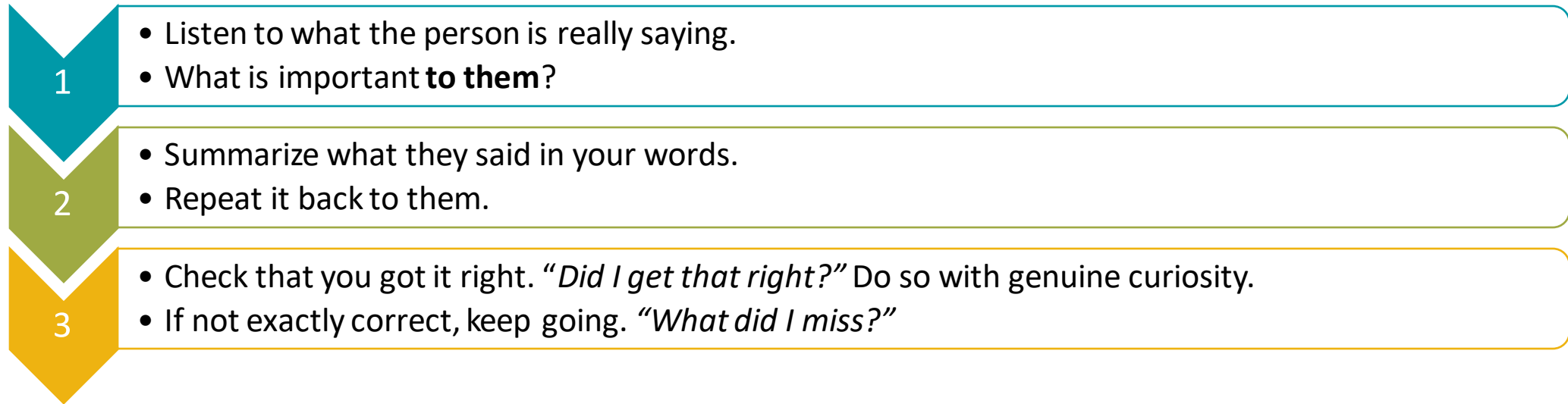
Activity: Creating conditions for dialogue

- **Conversation dial** – from *I Never Thought of it that Way*, by Monica Guzman

- Time
- Attention
- Parity
- Containment
- Embodiment



Activity: Practice Looping



What is a silly topic you have argued about lately?

- **Person 1:** Share your perspective on this topic and why it is important to you
- **Person 2:** Listen, then practice looping
- Switch roles
- Discuss how this process was for you

Thank you!

Find out more about our project:

- Annotated bibliographies
- Literature review
- Current research phase
- selkirk.ca/courageous-dialogues

