REFLECTIVE STRUCTURED DIALOGUE METHOD WITH ESSENTIAL PARTNERS

Speakers: John Sarrouf, Director of Program Development and Strategic Partnerships, Essential Partners

Harriet Hayes, Division Head of Humanities and Social Sciences, Bridgewater College

BECAUSE OUR DIVIDED NATION NEEDS CONVERSATION MORE THAN EVER.
TODAY’S PRESENTERS

John Sarrouf
Director of Program Development and Strategic Partnerships
Essential Partners

Harriett Hayes
Division Head of Humanities and Social Sciences, Associate Professor of Sociology
Bridgewater College
ENGAGING SPACES: LIBRARIES AND REFLECTIVE STRUCTURED DIALOGUE

Creating Dialogue to Engage Difference

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John Sarrouf
ABOUT US

What we do: Essential Partners builds the capacity of communities and organizations to engage, live and thrive with their differences. By enabling people to have new conversations about the issues that matter deeply to them and remain in relationship, our approach creates a foundation for trust, resilience and collaborative action.

“Behind every belief is a story. Behind every story a person.”
ABOUT US (cont’d)

► Where we work: Locally, nationally, globally

► How we work: Building trust, relationships and community
AGENDA

- A story from EP
- Why is this important?
- Why is this hard: The dynamics of a stuck conversation
- Constructive conversations: Inquiry, listening, reflection, speaking
- What does this look like in action
- Planning a dialogue
- Some examples
- The opportunity of a college library
GOALS OF THE WEBINAR

▪ **Deepen understanding** of conflict, polarization and stuck conversations
▪ **Introduce** the Reflective Structured Dialogue approach
▪ **Learn** how inquiry, structure, listening and reflection supports difficult conversations
▪ **Think** about the role of a library in supporting communities in having difficult conversations
▪ **Explore** your resources and how you might use RSD in your work and communities
Think of an important relationship you have on your campus with someone who holds very different perspectives than you do. What is meaningful to you about that relationship?
A STORY FROM THE FIELD

Diwali Festival
INSTEAD OF CONFLICT, CONNECTION
Your community is only as strong as your ability to engage across differences.
Political Polarization of the American Public, 1994-2014

Consistently liberal  |  Mixed  |  Consistently conservative

Democrats   |   Republicans


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WHAT WE BELIEVE

► Human identities are rich and complicated
  ► None of us fit into a single story

► We want to hold firm in our convictions
  ► The more secure we feel in our own story, the less we fear others

► We want to be valued members of our community

► We want to live out the fullness of our diversity

► When we can be engaged with each other, new possibilities emerge
We can’t afford to avoid tough questions. The opportunities are too great the costs too high.
EDUCATING ENGAGED CITIZENS

INDICATORS THAT PREDICT ENGAGED CITIZENS

► Embedded political discourse
► Social Connectivity
► Physical Spaces
► Institutional Nimbleness

(FROM THE INSTITUTE FOR DEMOCRACY & HIGHER EDUCATION)
BRIDGEWATER COLLEGE

Academic Citizenship

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PERSPECTIVE TAKING

Listening to, understanding and evaluating many different points of view; dealing with diversity
Challenging and evaluating public opinions with regard to one’s own; weighing competing views and supporting one’s own.
SELF-AUTHORSHIP

Cultivating one’s own voice; empowerment
HOW THIS LIVES ON A CAMPUS
What kinds of events are your libraries already having that have the purpose of engaging people with each other on important topics?
REFLECTIVE STRUCTURED DIALOGUE

PURPOSES
Improved communication to enhance curiosity, mutual understanding and respect (NOT: Debate, problem-solving, education, etc.)

What Happens:
► Stereotypes dissolve; stories are re-authored
► Partisans re-humanized
► Participants listen to understand, speak to be understood
► New patterns of communication take root
► Move from certainty to curiosity to caring
► Changed attitudes and enhanced empathy
► Reflection on one’s own and others’ perspectives
► New possibilities emerge for collaboration
WHY CONVERSATION?

Community

Relationships

Conversation
Why are difficult conversations so difficult?
CONVERSATIONS GET STUCK

Stuck conversations

Stuck stories

Stuck relationships

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YOUR BRAIN ON THREAT

Think of a time when you became upset about something that was said about something that was important to you (e.g. core social or political values or beliefs, family, friends, race, religion, ethnicity). This may work better if it was a person you wanted to be in relationship with.

What did you notice:

► In your body?
► In your thoughts about yourself or the other person?
► About your emotions?
► About what you felt tempted to do?
YOUR BRAIN ON THREAT

What would have been a more constructive alternative?
Threat

How the Brain responds in crisis.
We think about how the brain has evolved to help us survive and the effects that has on how we communicate across difference.
The parts of our brain responsible for responding to threats to our physical safety are the same parts that respond when we feel our identity or values being threatened.

Whether we’re being chased by a lion or feel someone is disrespecting our identity or an important belief, we respond the same way. The fast thinking parts of our brain take over and focuses everything on protecting us. We don’t think about why we’re reacting the way we are.

It’s natural: The conclusion comes first, and the arguments follow.
The threat affects our...

Pre-frontal cortex functions diminish.

Perceptions narrowed.

Increased generalizations and over-simplifications.

Defensiveness.

Small problems become BIG ones.

Ability to collaborate plummets.
It takes 20 minutes

**REACT**

It takes 1/5 of a second for the protection parts of our brain to take over when they sense emergencies.

**RECOVER**

It takes about 20 minutes to get out of those parts.
Polarization: A self-perpetuating system
WHERE ARE YOUR COMMUNITIES POLARIZED?
Imagine yourself as part of the solution – what role might you and your fellow librarians play?
CYCLE OF CONSTRUCTIVE CONVERSATION

LISTEN
for meaning
values
emotions

ASK
open
honest
personal questions

RESPOND
speak to be understood
assume good intentions

REFLECT
pause
slow down
“SAFE ENOUGH” or ENGAGED SPACES

► What conditions do people need in a group that would enable them to speak about what is very important to them but might also be difficult to say?

► What agreements, structures or other conditions would need to be present before they could share?

► What would make it easier for people to hear something difficult to hear?
OUR APPROACH TO DIALOGUE

► Purpose
► Preparation
► Reflection
► Structure
► Communication Agreements
► Questions
DIALOGUE: ITS DEEP PURPOSE

A conversation for the purposes of exchanging information, enhancing mutual understanding, discovering shared meanings, reducing prejudice, surfacing creative thinking, developing trust.
PREPARATION

► Create an invitation that helps align participants’ expectations and purpose

► Understand their hopes, concerns, experience, strengths and resilience

► Invite collaboration, communication and care

► Connect with others before dealing with the issue
A DIALOGUE STRUCTURE

In groups of 6-8 – sitting in a circle – for 45-90 minutes

- Welcome and orientation – explain the purpose & structure
- Introductions – people introduce themselves
- Communication agreements – creating a “safe-enough” space
- Opening questions – 1-3 predesigned questions answered in a go-around
- Questions of genuine interest
- Closing questions
INTRODUCTIONS

► Introductions invite people to begin to tell their story – to be known in the ways they want to be known

► We lean toward stories, values and shining moments – to things that people might have in common. We lean away from rank, position, resume and how long someone has belonged to the community
COMMUNICATION AGREEMENTS

► We can “pass” if we are not ready or do not wish to respond
► We will listen to understand and speak to be understood
► We’ll speak one at a time and will not engage in side conversations
► We’ll “step up” and “step back”
► We’ll respect timeframes
► We will speak for ourselves and not on behalf of others
► We’ll respect confidentiality by not allowing others to be identified
OPENING QUESTIONS

Questions that invite - Experiences that inform beliefs:

“Share an experience you have had that informs the way you approach how we regulate guns in our community?”
Questions that invite - What’s at the heart of the matter:

“What values or commitments do you hold that inform your decisions about legalizing marijuana? Where did you learn those values?”
OPENING QUESTIONS cont.

Questions that invite - Complexity:

“As you think about your perspectives and experiences with this issue, can you speak about any ways you might be pulled in different directions? Like: On the one hand, I really care about _____, and on the other hand I care about or appreciate ________, so it’s a little complicated for me. “
CHANGING THE QUESTION

From: Should we or shouldn’t we...
      To
 What values lead you to your beliefs about...

From: What’s wrong with....
      To
 What are your hopes and what are your concerns
REFLECTION BUILT-IN

▸ Reflect for 2 min. after question is read: make notes if you want to

▸ 2 minutes each to speak; take a breath between speakers

▸ Take key words/notes on what speakers say so that you can ask questions later to learn more, check out meanings or your assumptions, etc.

▸ Reflect for 1 min. after all have spoken to write a question or that you’d like to ask others later
QUESTIONS OF GENUINE INTEREST

► Ask each other questions

► Things you really want to know more about, based on what the speaker has said

► Avoid rhetorical, judgmental or advice giving questions etc.
CLOSING QUESTION

► As you end this dialogue what would you like to continue to think or dialogue about?

► One thing you did or refrained from doing that allowed this dialogue to go as it did?
REFLECTIVE STRUCTURED DIALOGUE IS

► **Scalable** – You can create a resource of community facilitators to support large groups all over campus

► **Teachable** – People can learn to facilitate these kinds of dialogues and support their community without being an expert at facilitation or the topic

► **Adaptable** – This can be used in full form to address the most divisive topics or in parts to allow more people to be heard

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Your Next Steps

► Who can you partner with?

► What already exists as an event or forum that can be transformed into a dialogue?

► Whose voices need to be heard? How can you get them in the room?

► Is there a space in the library that could be the go to spot for dialogue?

► What would you need to feel like you could initiate or convene a dialogue?
What conversations does your community need to have?

How can we help?
CONNECT WITH US

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WHATISESENTIAL.ORG
REGISTRATION NOW OPEN

SERIES 2: Academic Libraries
Register now at: ala.org/LTC-models
CLAIM YOUR BADGE

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Visit www.credly.com
2. Create an account or login
3. Click on “Claim Credit”
4. Enter “LTCAcademic2” to claim badge
QUESTIONS?
THANK YOU!

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