

# Learning Conversations. The value of interactive learning

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## Table of contents

### Chapter 1 Conversations – we cannot live without them 1

- 1 Conversation as the place where we learn 1
- 2 Community building through conversation 2
- 3 The oral tradition of conversations 4
- 4 Diversity in conversation 6
- 5 Conversation as pedagogy 7

### Chapter 2 Guidelines for using and selecting conversation types 12

- 1 Phases in conversations 12
- 2 Selecting a conversation type 15
- 3 Facilitation guides for conversation: how do they work? 24
- 4 Creating space 26
- 5 Preparing the setting 28

### Chapter 3 Conversation facilitation guides 30

- 1 A closer look – Challenging preconceived ideas 30
- 2 Exploring your position – Using conversations to clarify own thinking 33
- 3 Excavating a story – Using conversations to better understand personal experiences 35
- 4 Conversation between stories – Using conversations to explore themes between stories 38
- 5 Provisions – Collecting resources for a conversation 40
- 6 Yes, but what is it? – Asking questions to prompt clarification 42
- 7 Pause and speak – Creating time for reflection in a conversation 45
- 8 Courage to disagree – Expressing disagreement as a positive contribution to the conversation 49
- 9 Loosening the yoke – Facilitating conversations about authoritative texts 51
- 10 Facing a dilemma – Having a conversation when making the right choice is difficult 54
- 11 The art of debating – Using conversations to clarify opinions and produce new insights 58
- 12 Simple perspective – Coming to grips with difficult issues 64
- 13 Investigating habits – Discussing things we take for granted 66
- 14 Speak as a friend – Developing an open approach to a sensitive issue 68
- 15 Sharing personal anecdotes – Looking for the big picture in the details of a small story 70
- 16 The love of reading – Promoting reading through conversations 73
- 17 Sharing a text – Exploring different interpretations of a text through a conversation 75
- 18 Through the hourglass – Having conversations about real but difficult questions 77
- 19 Mediating learning experiences – Using an inductive approach to understand concepts 82
- 20 Exploring meaning – Exploring the meaning of a concept in different languages 85
- 21 Pursuing a definition – Using conversations to clarify your own thoughts about a concept 87
- 22 The chorus speaks – Reflecting on a conflict from some distance 89
- 23 Lamentation – Combining faith and accusation 92
- 24 *Izibongo* – Using conversations to bring praise 94
- 25 Learning conversation about conversations – Using conversation as an exercise in reflection 98

### Chapter 4 Beyond the learning conversation – how to go on from here? 100

Suggestions for further reading 103

Index 105

## **Preface**

Welcome to the world of conversations. Where people get together, conversations arise. In our classrooms, however, learning conversations that engage all are rather rare. Why? Are we in a constant hurry? Who or what is dictating to us that there is no time for genuine conversations with our learners regularly? Or are there practical stumbling blocks: the size of the class, the discipline of the learners, assessments that need to be completed, the class schedule that restricts activities to 40 minutes? Nevertheless we see the need to talk in our learners; we also see it – maybe we need to look a little bit better or deeper – in ourselves. After all, in most cases the topics are relevant and important to our lives, and we should be able to talk about them. Conversations create a rich and valuable environment for learning.

We consider us to be one of you and you to be one of us. We address you as a teacher who looks for practical suggestions to make education more interesting and challenging, and an educator who is keen to contribute towards building democracy. You may be teaching in adult education and wonder how to draw on the rich experience of adults when they meet to learn. You may be working in teacher education, or you may be one of the students who wants to become a teacher. You know about the importance of classroom interaction through your studies, but also through your personal experience: you know how difficult it is to learn if there is little interaction. So, now is the time to sit together and have a learning conversation.

We hope that you will use this book as a conversation with us, the authors. We also hope that what you read here will stimulate you to learn more about learning conversations, the different styles and types, and how they may be used to make your work as an educator more interesting, more enjoyable, and more meaningful, for yourself and your learners. We also hope that you may learn about your own participation in conversations. What could your contributions be to providing meaningful learning opportunities?

# 10 Facing a dilemma

Having a conversation when making the right choice is very difficult

*If a massive bull charges you, which horn would you prefer to be stabbed with? That is the question when you have a dilemma. The bull is right in front of you; there is no way out; all the options have serious drawbacks. Nevertheless you have to choose. In this choice your values and principles are in conflict. You will have to decide which principles are more important.*

*Facilitating a conversation around a dilemma is a delicate process. The reason for this is that a dilemma is a difficult situation; it is difficult to engage in a conversation where there are no easy answers. In such a situation we usually ask for advice, call for help, or simply act on impulse. The bull is coming. Extra skills are required to put the bull 'on hold' and create some space, both mentally and emotionally, for a conversation.*

*A conversation around a dilemma consists of two parts. The first part focuses on clarifying and understanding the dilemma. Experiencing a dilemma is not a pleasant feeling; participants may feel that they are failing; they may feel confused; or they may even feel torn. The tendency is to jump to a solution, before the problem – the dilemma itself – is explored. But don't rush the conversation and take time to explore the dilemma.*

*In the second part, the analysis of the dilemma provides a solid base for the exploration of different solutions, both theoretically: 'how can I establish some kind of harmony between the conflicting reasons?'; and practically: 'what is appropriate behaviour in this specific case?'*

*Note that dilemma's do not only appear in daily life. They may also arise when we experience contradictions in knowledge we take for granted, or in the conflict between our knowledge and beliefs.*

## The main steps

The main steps involved in discussing a dilemma are the following:

- identify a situation in which a dilemma was experienced
- discuss the dilemma to clarify and understand all the aspects involved
- test the structure of the dilemma practically
- describe the decision to be made.

What follows is a more detailed description of this conversation type.

## Steps in part 1: Clarify

1. Collect examples of dilemma's, preferably concrete situations in which one or more of the participants are or were involved. A dilemma has the following structure: "In situation X I can choose action A, which has drawback M; or choose action B, which has drawback N". Formulate A and B as specific acts, and M and N as serious drawbacks; they are consequences that you do not want to happen. Nevertheless, you have to act.
2. Test the formulation of the dilemma. What exactly is the dilemma? What are the two in this dilemma? What serious drawbacks are manifest in each of these options?

3. Illustrate the dilemma on a large sheet of paper or a whiteboard in the form of a bull with two horns:
  - a. draw the situation and the choice you have to make;
  - b. draw the alternative actions, A and B;
  - c. provide the arguments for each alternative, separated into pros and cons.
4. Finally, what is the decision you have to make in the dilemma? It is between A and B. Try to describe A and B as accurately as possible.

### Steps in part 2: Analyse

5. If you had to choose right now, what would your decision be?
6. Formulate a sentence with the following structure: “In situation X I choose action A, because for me, ... is most important; although by choosing action A, I have to accept that ... will be part of the consequences”.
7. Say these sentences to each other. Make an overview of the different arguments that are given the most weight.
8. Which arguments are new to you, or are different from what you had been thinking before? Do they change your outlook or position?
9. Imagine you had to justify your decision in public (for example in your team, your family or your community). How would you feel? When you have to make the decision you are willing to make, would you see yourself as a person who is fair?
10. Reflect. What did you learn about dilemmas and about having a conversation about dilemmas?