

Hard topics

***Empowering Young People
for Dialogue***

Hard Topics

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Ljubljana, 2025

IMPRESUM

Hard Topics: Empowering Young People for Dialogue

Authors: Matej Cepin, Sabina Belc, Marija Šeme-Bonizzi, Alice Straniero, Diana Todorova, Zsuzsanna Farkas, Andreja Snoj Keršmanc, Eva Povalej, Sanja Obaha Brodnjak

Editor: Matej Cepin

Design and Illustrations by: Eva Gajšek

Photos by: Tímea Nyúl-Schmidt and Emese Vázsonyi Balassa

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Introduction

*Matej Cepin,
Socialna akademija*

The Challenge

Technological innovations like the internet, social media and artificial intelligence, have profoundly changed our habits – how we access information, shop, plan, and socialise.

While these advances connect us more than ever, they also contribute to alienation, mental health struggles, societal divisions, and even global conflicts. Social polarisation is a growing concern.

For young people, this digital world isn't a shift – it's their reality. Unlike older generations, they've never known life before these changes. That's why youth workers should address social polarisation. And that's why this manual was written.

What's in This Book?

In the next chapter, we delve into the challenge of polarisation. **In the third chapter**, we emphasise the importance of dialogue as one of the best responses to this challenge. We also present the key concepts related to dialogue. **The fourth chapter** introduces practical methods that can be used when working with young people on the topic of dialogue. Finally, **in the fifth chapter**, the book concludes with recommendations for implementing such activities.

Who is This Book for?

First and foremost, it is intended for youth workers and youth leaders, i.e., those working with young people in non-formal settings.

Secondly, it is also aimed at anyone whose life revolves around young people: teachers, educators, coaches, religious workers, community workers, social workers, and more.

This book will benefit all those who want to take their work with young people, especially concerning social polarisation and dialogue, to the next level.

How Can You Use This Book?

If you feel confident in using various methods but lack specific knowledge about dialogue and social polarisation, the concepts presented in the second and third chapters will be most useful to you.

On the other hand, if you're more familiar with the theory but need practical approaches, you'll find the methods in the third chapter and the recommendations for implementation in the fourth chapter particularly helpful. The best approach is likely a combination of both.

But That's Not All!

This guide is part of a larger project called **Hard Topics**. On the project's website, hardtopics.eu, you can also find other tools to overcome the challenge of polarisation in young people.

Dialogue Guidelines are a set of 10 cards that can be used to introduce young people to the concept of dialogue. They are useful for keeping participants engaged during dialogue practice and for reflecting on dialogue sessions.

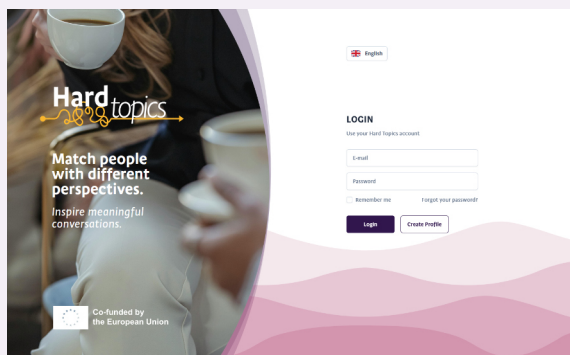
HardTopics app is helpful when organising events. The app pairs participants (usually young people) based on their responses to a questionnaire, aiming to match individuals who are as different as possible. These pairs are then invited to engage in one-on-one conversations.

On the website, you can also find **workshop plans** on the topic of dialogue, **recommendations** for institutions and an invitation to the **Dialogue Network**, association of organisations and individuals, committed to work on these topics.



About the Hard Topics Project

The project addresses the challenge of increasing social polarisation, as it is becoming harder to foster constructive conversations on social issues.



The project directly involved more than 1000 young people, at least 15 % of whom face geographical or cultural challenges, along with more than 110 youth workers.

The main goal of the project is to strengthen the dialogue skills of young people and youth workers. Doing this, the project aims to create spaces for discussions about shared European values.

The project is co-funded by Key Action 2 of the Erasmus+: Youth program and will run from October 2022 to May 2025.

The lead partner is **Socialna akademija** from Slovenia, and the project also includes **IniciativAngola** from Austria, **KatHAZ** from Hungary, and **Documenta** from Croatia.

Project number: 2022-1-SI02-KA220-YOU-000090117.

We extend our sincere gratitude to the project team:

- **Sabina Belc, Sanja Obaha Brodnjak and Andreja Snoj Keršmanc** from Socialna akademija,
- **Alice Straniero and Diana Todorova** from Documenta,
- **Marija Šeme-Bonizzi, Katja Križnar and Katarina Mischkulnig** from IniciativAngola,
- **Zsuzsanna Farkas and Barnabas Gergely** from KatHaz.

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Matej Cepin, editor



The Challenge of Polarisation

*Sabina Belc, Socialna akademija, and
Marija Šeme-Bonizzi, IniciativAngola*

To understand the need for dialogue, we have to understand how our society functions and how different opinions within it may lead to fragmentation. This division of society is called **polarisation**.

However, defining a complex term with as many nuances as polarisation is challenging.

The term polarisation, as it is understood in recent academic and political debates, does not refer to political, social, cultural, and religious diversity and pluralism as such, but to a growing division of society into opposing groups in important questions about the future of society.

Societies built on democracy share values and principles and, ideally, social bonds. However, polarisation drives social and political fragmentation, challenging these certainties and bonds.



Most people agree that dividing society into opposing groups weakens social unity and safety, making it easier for radical ideas to spread. Therefore, identifying and reducing polarisation is a crucial preventive approach to counter early radical trends before they fully develop and lead to violence.¹

Trends Driving Societal Polarisation

To explore the reasons for this division of society, we have to dive deeper into some of the most obvious trends that lead to polarisation.

One great and perhaps the most obvious trend leading to social polarisation is the continuous decline in trust in the media. Research findings show that audiences who demonstrate **low levels of trust in the media** are more likely to believe false information rather than accurate information.

Nevertheless, news trust is about more than the accuracy of the information presented. Rather, it also frames how media organisations work to meet public expectations, including how news content is (or is not) reflective of audiences' lived experiences and social realities. Additionally, it has long been recognised that audiences are more likely to believe a news story when it contains ideas consistent with their pre-existing attitudes, whereas stories that challenge these perspectives are often dismissed as inaccurate.

When audiences mistrust news content, they not only refuse to share it with others, but they will often turn to non-mainstream sources in the future. Researchers notably observed a strong relationship between low trust in mainstream media content and a preference for alternative news sources.

¹ European Forum for Urban Security. "What Is Polarisation and How to Respond at the Local Level." Accessed November 17, 2023.

Low trust in the news can lead to less trust in institutions and rules. This can make people prefer personal experiences over expert knowledge. There exists a clear relationship between mistrust in the news media and mistrust of other institutions, like the government, which creates a divide between an informed citizenry versus one that is increasingly sceptical.²

The trust in media is highly connected to the way media presents certain information. The media can go so far as to make their news lead to misinformation. Misinformation often happens because of **false balance**, also bothsidesism, where journalists try to show both sides of an issue as equally valid, even when the evidence doesn't support it. This can happen when journalists give too much attention to one side's arguments or leave out important information that would show one side is wrong.



False balance comes from the idea of "journalistic objectivity," where news is presented in a way that lets readers decide how to understand the facts and the arguments about them.³

Considering all the above, we can conclude that (digital) media, and particularly social media, play a role in encouraging social polarisation. This is because social media sites like Facebook through their algorithms group friends and acquaintances into identical circles, and social news sites like Digg or Reddit can facilitate a consumption of news that is biased by its user's choices.

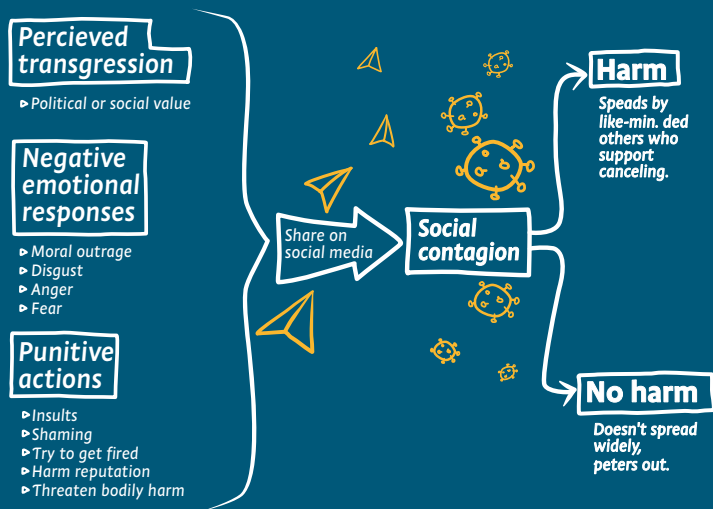
² Cover, Rob, Ashleigh Haw, and Jay Daniel Thompson. *Fake News in Digital Cultures: Technology, Populism and Digital Misinformation*. Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2022.

³ Wikipedia. "[Social Polarization](#)." Accessed November 17, 2023.

Simulation models and social media data show that people tend to lose social ties to friends of the opposite political ideology when news coverage differs greatly between news sources of opposite political lean, i.e., a polarised information ecosystem. This customised news consumption leads to the creation of echo chambers, therefore reinforcing the existing beliefs of the users.⁴

Another driver of these echo chambers is **cancel culture**. Emerging in the late 2010s and early 2020s, cancel culture involves isolating, boycotting, rejecting, dismissing, or attacking individuals perceived to have behaved or spoken inappropriately, often via social media.⁵

Notable examples of left-wing cancel culture include J. K. Rowling (see [here](#)), and Roseanne Barr (see [here](#)). On the opposite side, Republican Liz Cheney lost her seat after criticising Trump and co-leading the investigation into the January 6 Capitol attack.⁶



Graphics: Dholakia, Utpal. "What Is Cancel Culture?" Psychology Today, July 6, 2020.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Wikipedia. "Cancel culture." Accessed July 4, 2024.

⁶ Jennifer Rubin. "Republicans Just Cancelled Liz Cheney". Washington Post, May 12, 2021.

But, not only people but also companies can be cancelled, like Pepsi for its ad related to the protests Black Lives Matter (see video report [here](#)).⁷

Furthermore, to name some more reasons for the polarisation, we have to mention some of the following trends. **Economic inequality** can make societal divisions worse as different groups focus on different interests. Also, focusing **political debates on identity issues** can make emotions stronger and increase polarisation. Finally, **extreme positions and aggressive language** from political leaders make public discussions more divisive and worsen polarisation.⁸

Given this landscape of increasing polarisation, it's crucial to understand how the overwhelming amount of information we encounter daily can shape our opinions and reinforce existing divides.

Shaping Opinions in a Divided World

We live in the information age. In 2024, 328.77 million terabytes of data are created each day.⁹ With this flood of information, we can find ourselves experiencing **information overload** – a state of being overwhelmed by the amount of data presented for one's attention or processing.¹⁰

What happens when our information processing faculties are overwhelmed? It can lead to fatigue, confusion, stress, anxiety, and even depression, especially for children and adolescents. The executive function in our brain can get overloaded, leading to unease and difficulty in making decisions.¹¹

In our lives, we frequently encounter situations where we must make decisions with incomplete information. In these instances, we often rely on heuristics and biases – decision-making strategies that shape how we evaluate and prioritise different types of information. These strategies can fuel our

⁷ Vice. "What Is Cancel Culture and What Does It Mean in 2024?". Accessed July 4, 2024.

⁸ Cu, Yanfeng, and Zhongyuan Wang. "Income Inequality and Global Political Polarization: The Economic Origin of Political Polarization in the World." *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 27, no. 2 (2022): 375–398.

⁹ **Exploding Topics**. Amount of data Created Daily. Accessed December 19, 2023.

¹⁰ TechTarget. "Information Overload." Accessed December 19, 2023.

¹¹ Bouygues, Helen Lee. "Escaping the Rabbit Hole: How to Combat Information Overload." *Forbes*. September 13, 2021.

belief perseverance and consequently contribute to rising political polarisation.

What is belief perseverance? Belief perseverance describes how we continue



to hold onto established beliefs even when faced with clear, contradictory evidence. We tend to prioritise our initial conclusions and resist changing our minds, even when it might be in our best interest to do so.¹²

When we try to confront polarising opinions, we can encounter some issues as our beliefs often become intertwined with our self-identity. We may feel like recognising that a long-held belief might be incorrect as a personal failure, leading to feelings of inadequacy or insecurity so we don't accept such contradictory evidence to preserve our self-esteem.¹³

How can we avoid entrapping ourselves in this loop and support young

¹² The Decision Lab. "Belief Perseverance." Accessed December 19, 2023.

¹³ Ibid.

people in self-reflection?

1. Check News Media for Logical Fallacies

When evaluating news media and opinion makers, look out for logical fallacies in their arguments. Understanding these fallacies can help you critically analyse the information presented and form less biased opinions. You can explore more about logical fallacies [here](#).



2. Meet Up with Diverse People

Engage with a diverse group of people. Ask for feedback and interact with curiosity. Pay attention to your reactions and identify the beliefs that influence your responses. This can help you recognise and address your **mental blind spots and cognitive biases**.¹⁴ For more information on cognitive biases, visit the page [Your Bias](#).



Dialogue as an Antidote to Polarisation

How can we form a bridge among people with opposing views in a polarised society? How can we bring them closer to have meaningful conversations and seek mutual understanding? The answer is dialogue.

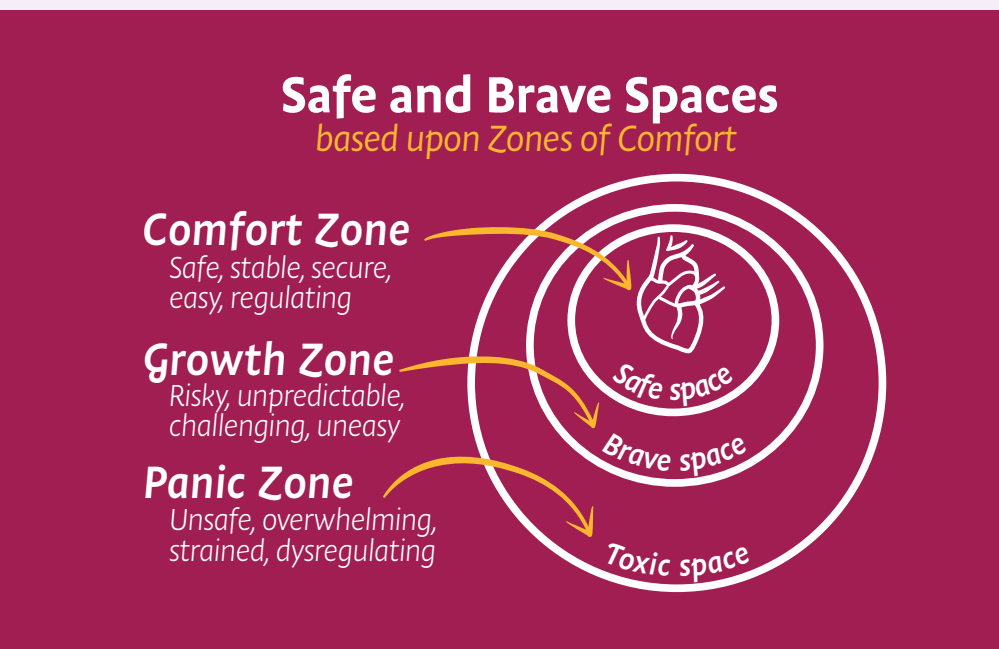
"If the structure does not permit dialogue, the structure must be changed." – Paulo Freire

What kind of structure enables dialogue learning? Boostrom argues that courage is required for a learning experience, as learning involves not only risk but also pain, as we must let go of old views to embrace new perspectives. In this process, we are often exposed and vulnerable.¹⁵

¹⁴ Acton, Carmen. "Are You Aware of Your Biases?" Harvard Business Review, February 2022.

¹⁵ Boostrom, Robert. "Safe Spaces: Reflections on an Educational Metaphor." Journal of Curriculum Studies 30, no. 4 (1998): 397–408.

To complement safe spaces, the concept of brave space was introduced. Creating brave spaces allows individuals to engage in challenging conversations, confront differing viewpoints, and grow through discomfort. This structure fosters genuine dialogue and bridges divides in a polarised society.¹⁶



Arao and Clemens articulated five fundamental invitations for communities that support the creation of brave spaces:

1. Controversy with Civility

We expect and respect the diversity of opinions. The group commits to exploring sources of disagreement and collaborating to find common solutions.¹⁷

¹⁶ Ford, Natalie Jean, Gomes, Larissa Marie and Brown, Stephen. "Brave Spaces in Nursing Ethics Education: Courage through Pedagogy." *Nursing Ethics* 31, no. 1 (February 2024): 101–113.

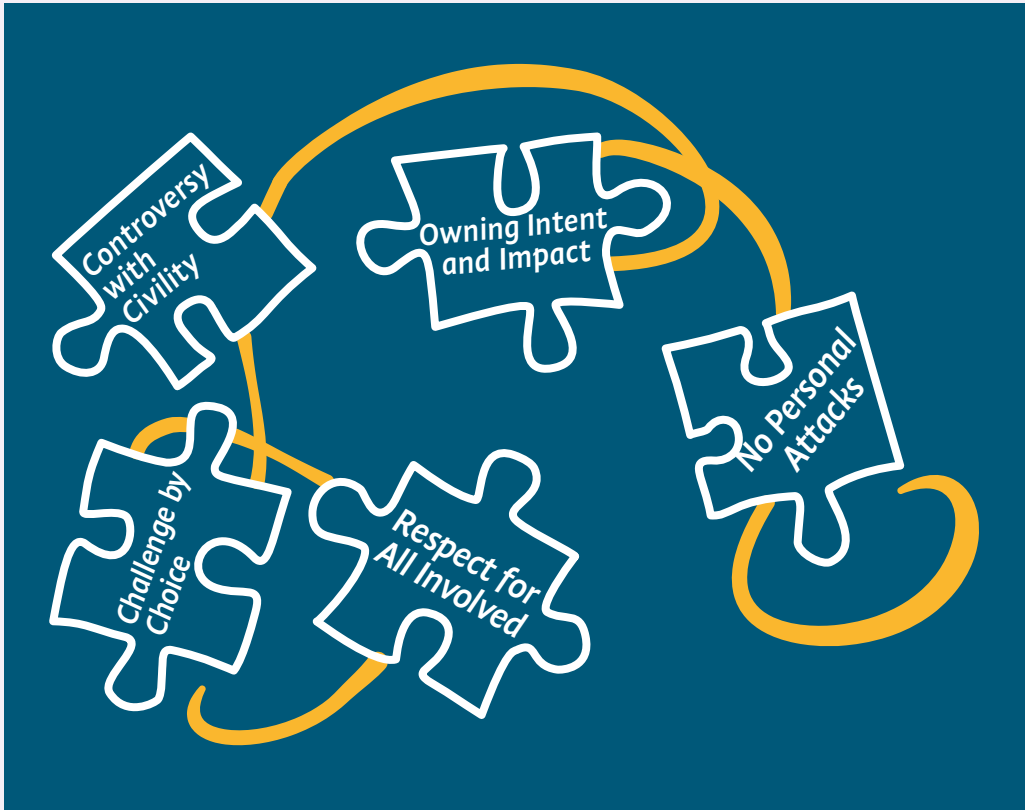
¹⁷ Astin, Helen S., Astin, Alexander W. "A Social Change Model of Leadership Development: Guidebook: Version III." Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, University of California, Los Angeles, 1996.

2. Owning Intent and Impact

We encourage recognising and creating space to discuss situations where conversations have negatively affected someone's feelings. The effect does not always align with our intention, and positive intent does not nullify a negative impact. We respect the experiences and feelings of individuals in the group by taking responsibility for the consequences of our words.

3. Challenge by Choice

Participants can freely decide to what extent they want to engage in challenging conversations and how much they are willing to step out of their comfort zones. Both the group and we must respect this decision.



4. Respect for All Involved

We invite the group to share what respect means to each person. This can enhance awareness of the diversity in perceptions of what behaviour is respectful and what is not.

5. No Personal Attacks

We encourage an agreement that no one in the group will intentionally cause harm to another member. The group is invited to explore the difference between a personal attack and challenging a belief that makes a member uncomfortable.

For an authentic and impactful experience, a certain amount of vulnerability and discomfort is necessary. Therefore, it is important to maintain both safe spaces and brave spaces, so they can complement and challenge each other.

In the next chapter, we will look at some more concepts related to dialogue.





Dialogical Concepts

*Introduction by
Matej Cepin, Socialna akademija*

The word "dialogue" is increasingly used in a variety of contexts. We hear about intercultural dialogue, social dialogue (between employers, employees, and the state), inter-religious dialogue, and even structured dialogue within the EU. This rise in usage sometimes creates the impression that the more we talk about dialogue "in theory," the less we actually practice it "in reality".

What makes dialogue truly meaningful? One could say that quality dialogue occurs when participants feel understood, are able to express what matters most, and conflicts remain manageable. The quality of dialogue is not just about communication styles but also about the broader context, such as trust and the openness of the environment.

Dialogue can be understood in two ways:

- **Dialogue as communication** – a two-way exchange of ideas, opinions, and perspectives where all participants actively listen and contribute to developing a shared understanding.

- **Dialogue as a method of social engagement** – a broader way of forming and nurturing relationships between individuals and communities.

When seen as communication, dialogue can range from surface-level conversations to deeper exchanges involving feelings, vulnerabilities, and personal stories. The more layers we engage in, the richer the dialogue becomes.

However, in contexts involving diverse communities, dialogue as mere communication is insufficient. It also has to be understood as a method of navigating social relationships, addressing underlying biases, and creating spaces where genuine encounters can happen.

In this chapter, we have explored some concepts related to the topic of dialogue. We hope you will find them useful in your work with young people.



Nonviolent Communication

*Alice Straniero and Diana Todorova,
Documenta*

Nonviolent Communication (NVC) is a philosophy and process of communication developed by Marshall Rosenberg in the 1960s. With the concept of "nonviolent", the author wanted to express the importance of communicating with others with respect, empathy, understanding, compassion, and care.

Following Rosenberg's theory, nonviolent communication consists of two parts:

- **to express yourself honestly** and
- **to listen honestly.**

In both these parts, there are **4 elements of nonviolent communication** that can be used:

- **Observation.** Perceive the situation without judging. Before we react in a certain situation, it is important to take a moment and reflect on what we observe and what impact the observation has on our feelings.
- **Feelings.** Try to identify our feelings in the situation. Rosenberg says to pay attention to the difference between the categories of "pure feelings" and "interpretations and judgements" – meaning our interpretations of our and the other person's feelings.
- **Needs.** When we have identified the feeling we feel in the situation, we can identify the need we have that led to that specific feeling.
- **Requests.** In the end, the feeling can lead to a request on how the other person can fulfil our personal needs.

These four elements can help us in dialogue, both as a speaker – by better communicating our feelings and needs; but also as a listener – by becoming better in identifying the needs of the other person.

HOW TO USE NVC PROCESS



Further Readings

- Rosenberg, M. B. (2015). *Nonviolent communication: A language of life*. PuddleDancer Press.
- Image source: *The Non-Violent Communication Approach* – Live Forward Institute.

Backpack

Alice Straniero and Diana Todorova,
Documenta

Knowingly or not, we bring with us invisible "backpacks". We can describe this backpack as a set of behaviours, habits, practices, values, and traditions, which form through our lives, based on individual experiences, personal and family history, social norms, culture and traditions. Backpacks give us sets of values and ideologies to interpret reality and build our identity, so they can have a positive impact on us, by helping us in navigating the world.

However, backpacks can also generate biases, prejudices and misconceptions, because our instinct is to think that our backpacks (and as a consequence, our interpretations of reality) are always true, valid and natural. This instinct can cause us to dismiss or negatively judge others' perspectives, values, and experiences when they differ from ours.

When entering into dialogue with others, we should be aware of our own backpack and the unconscious biases it might generate. Becoming aware of our backpack





helps us understand ourselves better, and also others' habits, practices, and behaviours that might initially seem strange to us.

To "check our backpacks", in a situation of disagreement or conflict during dialogue, we can ask ourselves: "Which experiences (education, culture, family ...) influenced me and my beliefs?"; "Which different experiences might the other person have gone through?". By asking these questions, we do not minimise our beliefs and values, but we better comprehend where we come from, and the others' background and motivations.

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Comfort, Learning and Panic Zone

Marija Šeme-Bonizzi,
IniciativAngola

The "comfort zone," "panic zone," and "learning zone" are terms often used in educational and psychological contexts to describe different stages of learning and personal development. However, the need and openness for dialogue depends on the stage at which the person finds himself/herself at a certain time.

1. Comfort Zone

The comfort zone refers to a state of familiarity and ease where individuals are performing tasks or activities that they are already proficient in.

In this zone, there is minimal stress or challenge, and people tend to feel comfortable and confident.

Each individual has their version of comfort zone. This zone mostly consists of daily habits and everything is foreseeable. Individuals who remain for too long in this zone may experience apathy, boredom and monotony. However, on the other hand, a comfort zone is not only negative: it represents the personal area of one's resources, resilience, regeneration and experience of competence.

As in the comfort zone, there is no tension or other disruptor that would create the need for dialogue, an individual will not experience dialogue in this zone.

2. Panic Zone

The panic zone represents a state of extreme discomfort and anxiety. It occurs when individuals are pushed beyond their current abilities or face situations that are entirely new to them. In this zone, stress levels can be high, and the fear of failure or making mistakes is prevalent. In the panic zone, an individual reaches beyond their boundaries and there is no space for the dialogical process to happen.

3. Learning Zone

The learning zone is the ideal state for growth and development. It lies between the comfort and panic zones and involves activities or challenges that are just beyond an individual's current skill level. In this zone, there is a moderate level of stress, but it is manageable. It is here that significant learning and personal growth occur because individuals are pushed to acquire new skills and expand their capabilities.

Comfort zone
Safe place to reflect

Learning zone
Where you grow and learn

Panic zone
Learning is beyond what you are familiar with and becomes very difficult



The concept emphasises that to maximise learning and growth, individuals should strive to spend more time in the learning zone, where challenges are appropriately matched to their current skill level. Over time, this can lead to the expansion of one's comfort zone and the ability to tackle increasingly complex tasks.

The learning environment enables the individual to enter into the dialogue, to open to others' opinions and points of view and therefore manoeuvre the complexity of the dialogical process.

However, if an individual finds himself for too long in the panic zone, i.e. meaning that experiences are too complex and extraordinary for a very long period, he may be discouraged from any further attempts to engage in dialogue. Therefore, an appropriate balance is necessary for the individual to engage in dialogue.

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Powerful Questions

Matej Cepin,
Socialna akademija

Questions are crucial for dialogue. They open up space for expression. They stimulate learning. By asking questions, we can show that we are interested in the story of another person. They also allow us to explore the reasons why someone thinks the way they do.

However, not all questions are of the same quality. Some open up more space for expression than others. Some contain hidden assumptions that the other person does not even agree with and cannot be answered honestly and freely. There is even a term called "gotcha questions" – questions that try to prove that another person is wrong or even stupid.

It is said that every question has a certain power. Powerful questions stimulate other people better than weak ones. They make them think and answer more deeply.

In dialogue, we try to ask strong questions. And what are their main characteristics?

- **Open-endedness:** open-ended questions encourage expansive thinking and deeper responses because they cannot be answered with a simple "yes" or "no".
- **Relevance:** the question must relate to the individual or the situation in which he/she finds him/herself. If the other person fails to connect his or her experience to the question, even the depth of the question will not help.
- **Clarity:** A powerful question should be clear and easy to understand. Ambiguity can detract from its impact.
- **Challenge:** Questions that challenge the status quo or existing beliefs can push individuals to think critically and reconsider their perspectives.
- **Encouraging reflection:** Powerful questions often prompt introspection, allowing individuals to delve into their feelings, beliefs, and motivations.

- **Generating curiosity:** Questions that stimulate curiosity can drive individuals to explore, learn, and seek answers.
- **Being non-judgemental:** The question should be posed free from bias or leading suggestions, so the other person feels safe and open to answer honestly.
- **Provoking action:** Powerful questions often motivate change or inspire individuals to take specific actions.
- **Stimulating creativity:** Questions that open the door to imaginative thinking can lead to innovative solutions or ideas.
- **Depth:** A powerful question often goes beyond the surface, seeking to explore the underlying issues or deeper meanings.
- **Timing:** The right question at the right time can have a profound impact. Even the most profound question can lose its power if posed at an inappropriate time.
- **Personal Connection:** Questions that resonate on a personal level can have a stronger impact as they touch upon individual experiences, values, or aspirations.

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- Examples: **Toolkit Powerful Questions** (PDF; QR 1).
- More examples: **Conversational Leadership Website** (QR 2).



Active and Deep Listening

Zsuzsanna Farkas, KatHaz

For many people, listening is synonymous with silence. However, it is much more than that. It is a communication technique in itself, which can have many purposes. In addition to obtaining information, these include understanding the interlocutor or a specific situation, learning, problem solving and development.

Overall, listening determines how effective a conversation can be, and as a result, the quality of relationships we are able to establish with others.

Listening can be connected to many adjectives but two are very common: **active listening** and **deep listening**.

Active listening happens when the listener is fully engaged in what the speaker is saying. It is a two-way communication where the listener actively responds to the speaker. However, deep listening is quite different from that.

Deep listening is a type of listening in which the listener is fully present and gives himself /herself to the speaker. In deep listening, we are not trying to control or judge the conversation. We can speak about deep listening when you are determined to truly understand the speaker's point of view – even through reading "between the lines".

Deep listening is a technique in which we consciously try to understand the message of our interlocutor. This sounds simple, but it is often more complicated than we first think. It requires serious attention and interest. Having the right amount of empathy and quick reaction time are major advantages if you want to become a really good listener. This means that you have to pay close attention to verbal and non-verbal cues while listening. To do this, you must suspend judgement and be willing to accept new information from the speaker.

To pay close attention to the other person, you can't allow yourself to be distracted by anything from the communication and you can't start creating counterarguments or possible answers in your head before the other person has

finished speaking. Also, you have to be careful not to lose interest in what the other person is saying.

In deep listening, the listener does not always respond to the speaker's ideas but simply listens. In this case, the listener does not attempt to interrupt the speaker by asking questions and commenting on the ideas presented. However, this does not mean that the listener does not pay close attention to the speaker. On the contrary, although he/she listens, no attempt to react is made.

To improve your listening skills, you need to constantly reassure the other person that you are listening. It has probably happened to you too that you were unsure of what to say because you didn't see the sign that your interlocutor was paying attention to you. To avoid this, nod your head from time to time or use simple "aha" sounds to make the other person feel that you are paying attention. This doesn't necessarily mean you agree with him, it just grabs your attention.

In addition to these, you can summarise what was said in your own words when the other person is taking a break or has finished, thus communicating to him that you are paying attention and understanding what he is saying.

Further Readings

- **Tréneri Kézikönyv: Érzékenyítő tréningek elmélete és gyakorlata (PDF, QR 1).**
- **Így tesz jobb vezetővé az aktív hallgatás képessége (QR 2).**
- **Kommunikációs technika: Az aktív hallgatás (QR 3).**



Controversy with Civility

Sabina Belc,
Socialna akademija

When being in groups, conversations can bring up topics that can be polarising, like social justice questions. What should we do? Do we try to avoid conversation? Do we need to be cautious and voice opinions that could spark conflicting debates among group members? Or part ways with agree to disagree?

Agreeing to disagree can be used to retreat from conflict in order to avoid discomfort and the potential for damaged relationships. But if we let it become our ground rule of working with groups, it could enable members to stay in their comfort zone and restrict their engagement and learning.

Search for an alternative rule that inspires courage in the face of conflict and continues rather than stops the dialogue process yielded one of the seven critical values of the social change model of leadership development, established in 1994, which is Controversy with Civility.



Controversy with Civility recognises two fundamental realities of any group effort: that differences in viewpoint are inevitable and that such differences must be aired openly, but with civility. The word civility gives room for strong emotion and rigorous challenge. Still, it implies respect for others, a willingness to hear each other's views, and the exercise of restraint in criticising the opinions and actions of others.

We should remember that even if we need a bit of courage to bring the Controversy with Civility aspect to group work, some of the richest learning springs from ongoing explorations of conflict, whereby participants seek to understand an opposing viewpoint.

Further Readings

- Arao, B., Clemens, K. (2013). *From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces: A New Way to Frame Dialogue Around Diversity and Social Justice*. In L.M. Landreman, *The Art of Effective Facilitation: Reflections from Social Justice Educators* (pp. 135–150). Sterling, Virginia: Styles Publishing, LLC.
- Astin, H. S., Astin, A. W. (1996). *A Social Change Model of Leadership Development guidebook*, version 3. Los Angeles, CA: Higher Education Research Institute.

Emotional Self-Regulation

Alice Straniero and Diana Todorova,
Documenta

With the definition "Emotional self-regulation", we do not mean that we are not allowed to feel strong and sudden emotions, but that we are able to recognise them and process them in a way that makes it possible to continue to participate in dialogue.

When we recognise that something in the conversation has triggered us, we should take ourselves to a mental safe-space. In mental health, a safe-space is an inner location that you can visualise to reduce stress, relax, and recharge. Going to a mental safe-space, will help us to take a moment between "trigger" and "response", and not have an immediate reaction, which could lead to further conflict and interrupt the dialogue process.

I Notice, I Feel, I Can

A Three-Step Strategy for
Managing Big Feelings



I NOTICE

Notice what you feel in your body, like butterflies in your stomach.

This can be the first clue to your emotions.



I FEEL

Name the emotion you are feeling, and what happened to make you feel that way.



I CAN

Choose a strategy for managing your feelings, like belly breathing or going for a walk.



As we feel calmer, we should understand our emotions and give them a name (are we angry, sad, disappointed, offended ...?). Let's accept our emotions and feelings, they are valid! When we feel ready, we should calmly address the upsetting conversation and express our feelings and needs to others. Let's be aware of our limits, if we still feel uncomfortable, we can choose to interrupt the dialogue.

Further Readings

- Philippot, P., & Feldman, R. S. (2004). *The regulation of emotion*. L. Erlbaum.

Emotional Bank Account

Marija Šeme-Bonizzi,
IniciativAngola

The concept of an "emotional bank account" is a metaphorical way to describe the level of trust and emotional connection in a relationship. It was popularised by Stephen R. Covey in his book "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People." The balance of the account represents the amount of trust in the relationship. We make deposits into the account through our words and actions that build trust and strengthen our relationship. We make withdrawals from the account through our words and actions that erode trust. It's a simple concept with powerful implications for how we work together.

1. Deposits and Withdrawals: Just as you deposit money into a bank account to build savings and withdraw when you need it, you make emotional deposits and withdrawals in your relationships. Positive actions and behaviours like showing kindness, empathy, understanding, and keeping commitments are considered deposits. Negative actions, such as breaking promises, lying, showing disrespect, or not following through on commitments, are withdrawals.

Emotional Bank Account

Deposits

- Time together, doing fun things
- Physical touch
- When their parents believe in their capabilities
- Privileges and freedom
- Acts of kindness



Withdrawals

- Nagging or blaming
- Comparing to others accomplishments or success
- Broken promises
- Feeling criticised

2. Trust and Balance:

Trust is the cornerstone of any relationship. When you consistently make deposits by showing respect, honesty, and support, you build trust and create a positive balance in the emotional bank account. This balance of trust and positive

feelings enables the relationship to weather occasional conflicts or withdrawals without causing damage.

3. **Impact of Withdrawals:** When you consistently make withdrawals from the emotional bank account without replenishing them with deposits, the trust and emotional connection in the relationship can erode. Just as a bank account with a negative balance incurs penalties, a relationship with a negative emotional balance can lead to conflict, resentment, and ultimately, a breakdown in the relationship.
4. **Rebuilding Trust:** If you've made withdrawals or damaged the emotional bank account in a relationship, it's possible to rebuild trust by making consistent deposits over time. However, this process can take patience, effort, and genuine commitment to positive change.
5. **Effective Communication:** Effective communication is key to managing the emotional bank account. It involves listening actively, expressing feelings and needs honestly, and addressing concerns constructively. Open and respectful communication helps maintain a healthy emotional balance.
6. **Different Accounts for Different Relationships:** It's important to note that you may have separate emotional bank accounts for different relationships, such as with mother, father, brother, sister, friends, colleagues, and romantic partners. Each account reflects the unique dynamics and history of that relationship.

In summary, the emotional bank account concept serves as a useful metaphor for understanding the dynamics of trust and emotional connection in relationships. By making consistent emotional deposits through positive actions and behaviours and minimising withdrawals, you can build and maintain healthy, thriving relationships.

Further Readings

- Covey, Stephen R. (2013). *7 Habits Of Highly Effective People*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

The 3rd Alternative

Matej Cepin,
Socialna akademija

When it comes to conflict, we are used to thinking of two alternatives that contradict each other. It seems that if we are more in favour of one, we are less in favour of the other – and vice versa. Some examples of such dilemmas include: environmental preservation vs. economic development; religion vs. science, the political left vs. the political right, and a good salary vs. a job that makes me happy.

Our views are the result of our mental models or "paradigms". Paradigms are like maps: no map can be perfect. Each one is made with certain simplifications.

Being in conflict we think of two alternatives: "We can either follow your map or my map. In either case, at least one of us will lose. Yet the best option would be a compromise where both of us would lose half.

However, we ignore that we can also complete each other's maps. This way, we create something new, a solution that did not even exist before. We call this solution the 3rd alternative.

In order to develop the 3rd alternative Covey suggests the following 4 steps:

1. Ask: "Are you willing to go for a solution that is better than either of us has in mind?"
2. Define, what this "better" would look like.
3. Create possible solutions.
4. Arrive at the 3rd alternative.

We are usually not able to take these steps immediately. They demand a gradual change in worldview that can take years. To do this, Covey suggests the following paradigm shifts:

1. **I see myself.** I see myself not only as a member of a particular social group but as a unique individual.
2. **I see you.** I also see you not only as a member of a particular social group

but as a unique individual. You have something to tell me, I don't know everything about you!

3. I seek you out. I am ready to listen to you and look for reasons why you think the way you do.

4. I synergise with you. I believe that together we can create something that doesn't even exist yet.

The search for the third alternative is therefore not so much a matter of understanding the theory as a matter of changing one's personal perspective on the other person and on the dialogue.

Further Readings

- *Stephen R. Covey: The 3rd Alternative: Solving Life's Most Difficult Problems.*



I see myself.



I see you.



I seek you out.



I synergise with you.



Dialogical Methods

Introduction by
Matej Cepin, Socialna akademija

Introduction

After introducing ten concepts related to dialogue in the previous two chapters, this chapter shifts the focus toward practice.

We present 13 methods that our project team, based on our own experience, has identified as particularly effective in helping young people strengthen their dialogical competencies.

The first two methods described are directly linked to two key outcomes of this project: the Dialogue Guidelines Cards and the online application hardtopics.eu. The remaining 11 methods have been sourced from various references and adapted to ensure their direct applicability in the development of dialogical skills.

Dialogue Guidelines Cards

Andreja Snoj Keršmanc,
Socialna akademija

Learning Goals

Recognising key elements of quality dialogue. Reflecting on one's own participation in dialogue.

Time

From 15 to 45 minutes (depending on the method of use).

Description

The Dialogue Guidelines Cards are a tool that helps young people reflect on how to conduct a quality dialogue and what contributes to good communication. The content of the cards is based on **dialogical concepts**, which are discussed in more detail in **Chapter 3** of this handbook.

The cards are most effective when used in combination with other methods that promote dialogue and require young people to actively participate as stakeholders in the conversation. We highly recommend using them in conjunction with the **hardtopics.eu application**, which is presented as the next method.



Before starting the activity, the youth worker can **briefly introduce** the cards and their purpose so that the participants better understand how to use them.

Cards can be used in two ways, before or after the dialogue conversation.

A) Use the Cards Before a Dialogue

When used as a **preparation tool**, the cards introduce participants to the fundamental elements of meaningful dialogue. This helps create an open, respectful, and constructive communication environment.

Suggested activity flow:

Introduction (5 minutes)

Ask participants: "What does a good dialogue mean to you?" Emphasise that this exercise will help everyone develop a deeper understanding of how to engage in a meaningful dialogue.

Then, choose one of the suggested possibilities, depending on the size and age structure of the group:

Group Work with Cards (15 minutes)

- Each participant draws or selects one Dialogue Guideline Card.
- Participants have 2 minutes to read the card and consider its meaning.
- Each participant briefly explains their card and provides a concrete example – either from personal experience or a fictional situation.
- It is recommended to divide them into smaller groups, where they can discuss the content of the cards and connect it with their own experiences.

Discussion in Pairs (10 minutes)

- Participants are divided into pairs.
- Each person describes a situation that occurred in a challenging conversation and how the guideline they selected could help in the future to make the conversation lead to a different outcome.

Group Discussion (10–15 minutes)

Facilitator can use some of the following questions to facilitate the discussion.

- When was the last time you had a conversation where you truly listened to someone with a different opinion? How did it make you feel?

- Have you ever felt like someone wasn't listening to you? How did that affect the course of the conversation?
- How do you know you're in a dialogue and not just in a debate or persuasion?
- What does it mean to be "open to change" in a conversation? Does it mean we always have to change our opinion?
- How can we show respect in a conversation, even if we disagree with the other person?
- How would you describe the difference between listening and truly understanding?
- Why is it important to speak from our own experience and not on behalf of others?
- How can we recognise and overcome our own biases in a conversation?
- Which of these principles is most useful to you in your everyday life? Why?
- How would you support someone who is afraid to express their opinion in a group?

Participants discuss the questions and consciously try to apply the guidelines from the cards.

Conclusion (5 minutes)

In a circle, each participant shares one key aspect they will pay more attention to in future dialogues.

B) Use the Cards After a Dialogue

In this case, cards are used as a reflection tool, where participants analyse how the conversation went, what was effective, and what could be improved.

Suggested activity flow:

Preparation

Lay out the Dialogue Guidelines Cards on a table or on the floor so that participants can see them and choose from them. Explain that the reflection will occur in two rounds: first through individual sharing, followed by a group reflection.

Card Selection and Sharing (15-20 minutes)

Each participant takes a moment to think and to select one card that encourages them to reflect about the previous dialogue conversation or event. Then, one by one, they share their thoughts and experiences. It is important that others listen without interrupting or adding their comments.

What did I Hear in the 1st Round? (5-10 minutes)

After everyone has finished the first round of reflection, each participant asks themselves: What is staying with me the most from this sharing? Participants take turns sharing key thoughts that were triggered while listening to others. There is no need to repeat their previous answers but to reflect on the 1st round.

Conclusion (5-10 minutes)

Together, the group summarises what they have learned about dialogue and how they could improve further conversations. If desired, participants can write down one thought they would like to take with them. If the group is larger, the reflection can be divided into pairs or smaller groups, then key thoughts can be shared in the larger circle.

Materials

A set of dialogue guideline cards, stickers, paper, pencils (see the tip below).

Tips & Tricks

With younger participants, it may be useful to start reflecting dialogue events anonymously. Invite them to vote with stickers (put the green sticker to the card which represents your positive experience in the dialogue and put the red sticker to the card which represents your negative experience). Participants then share only what they feel comfortable with it.

Further Readings

- **Hard Topics Website.**



Meetings of Political Opponents Using Hardtopics.eu Application

Matej Cepin,
Socialna akademija

Find the app here: app.hardtopics.eu,
or scan the QR code!



Learning Goals

Participants practice dialogue with people of different world views.

Time

Around 1 hour.

Description

The HardTopics application is a tool for organising dialogical events (dates of political opponents) in youth work, education, and beyond. Events can be held live or remotely.

From the point of view of the youth worker (event organiser), its operation could be described in four steps.

Step 1: Setting Up the Event

- Youth worker creates a custom questionnaire or choose from ready-made options.
- Questionnaire is shared via QR code or a direct link.
- Participants complete the questionnaire on their own devices.

Step 2: Pairing Participants

- The algorithm matches participants into pairs with the most contrasting responses.
- Even participants with moderate opinions are paired to ensure diverse and meaningful discussions.

Step 3: Facilitating Dialogue

- Participants engage in conversations based on their differences.
- They gain insights into their own and their partner's responses, highlighting key contrasts.



Step 4: Gathering Feedback

- After the event, participants provide anonymous feedback through the application.
- Organisers can review insights, display results to the group, or keep them private for evaluation.

Materials

Hardtopics.eu web application.

Further Readings

- **Hard Topics Website.** See blog posts on the web page.



Identity Game

Alice Straniero and Diana Todorova,
Documenta

Learning Goals

- Awareness about own backpack.
- To understand the levels of trust among people.
- Trying out methods/processes for emotional regulation.

Time

Around 1 hour.

Description

The main idea of this method is for the participants to reflect on the theme of identity and question "How do I see myself? What is important for me? What makes my identity?"

By exchanging the papers with the attributes and having the task to "erase" important parts of the identity of another person, the participants become more aware about others' background, opinions, ideas and perspectives, and will be surprised to see what is most important to "keep" for them and for the others.

The method is used to discuss how mutable and different identities are, and for the participants to reflect about the images they have of themselves and of the others.

The participants sit in a circle. First they have the task to write down on a paper 6 attributes that "make their identity". The 6 attributes can be connected to their nationality, to their home town, but also to their interests (musician, animal-lover, gamer ...), or to their role in society or in their social context (teacher, mother ...), or any other thing the participants feel is important for their identity.

They have around 15 minutes to write down the 6 attributes that make them "them". After around 15 minutes, the participants will exchange their paper with the person sitting next to them.

At this point, each participant will have to cross 2 of the 6 attributes, "taking them away". They have about 10 minutes. After that, the paper will return to the participant who wrote it in the first place (so each participant will be returned a paper with their attributes, minus two).

At this point, they will have around 10 minutes to cross 2 more attributes from their own list. After that, the participants are all left with 2 attributes.

They discuss in groups the process and what they are "left with".

Materials

Papers and pen.

Tips and Tricks

It is important to mention to the participants to list attributes they are comfortable with sharing, as they will be discussed in the group.

Further Readings

- **WSR Booklet** (documenta.hr).



5 Cards or 4 Ways to Hear a Difficult Message

Alice Straniero and Diana Todorova,
Documenta

Learning Goals

- Practising communication styles;
- improving awareness about different forms of dialogue;
- practising emotional self-regulation.

Time

80 minutes.

Description

Introduction (10 minutes)

Speed-dating method in pairs, discussing the following questions:

- How do you usually handle conversations that are tough for you?
- Do you typically avoid difficult conversations with your friends and family so that you don't cause a conflict?
- How do you stick up for your opinion when others don't agree with it?

5 cards activity (2 to 5 rounds; up to 50 minutes)

For this activity, you will need groups of 5 participants each.

In the beginning, each participant receives one of the following cards:

- First card – A message that is hard to listen.
- Second card – Listen to the accusation and blame yourself.
- Third card – Listen to the accusation and blame the speaker.
- Fourth card – Focus on your feelings and needs.
- Fifth card – Focus on other people's feelings and needs.

Give one card to each of the five participants and at the end of each round replace the cards.



The participant receiving the First card will come up with one message "That is difficult to hear." For example "The way you impose your opinion on everybody when we talk is bothersome."

Each of the participants, depending on their Cards, reflects on a different possibility to hear this message. Each of them will vocally express a thought which reflects the particular option they have chosen.

Examples of the answers could be:

- Second card: A person who listens to the accusation and blames themselves could express the following: "Oh God, how I like to control everything around me. No wonder people find me bothersome."
- Third card: A person who listens to the accusation and blames the speaker could express the following: "Of course, if he bothered to listen, he would realise that everyone else present agrees with me."
- Fourth card: A person who focuses on their feelings and needs could express the following: "(Sigh) ... I feel so sorry because I would like more understanding of the way I'm trying to help here."

- Fifth card: A person who directs attention to the speaker's feelings and needs could have the following thought: "Hmm. I wonder if he's angry because he wants everyone's opinion to be heard and taken into consideration ..."

After the five people finish the first round, switch roles. It would be ideal if each participant would have the opportunity to practice all the roles.

Reflection (20 minutes)

After the activity, the trainer guides a reflection session. Possible questions for the reflection could be:

- How did you feel in each of the roles?
- Which role was the most difficult?
- Do you recognise any of these roles in your everyday conversations?
- What is the best way to respond to a message "that is difficult to hear"?

Materials

5 cards with the roles.

Tips and Tricks

Present the activity as a role-play game and underline that the roles are fictional, for participants to feel more confident and secure exploring the roles.

Further Readings

- Leu, L., & Rosenberg, M. B. (2015). *In Nonviolent Communication Companion Workbook: A Practical Guide for Individual, Group, or Classroom Study*. Essay, Puddle Dancer Press.

Barnga

Sabina Belc,
Socialna akademija

Learning Goals

- Participants raise awareness about their backpacks and how they influence their behaviours.
- Participants practice and reflect upon how to work over differences in understanding the rules of engagement.

Time

60 minutes.

Description

Barnga is a simulation game created by Sivasailam "Thiagi" Thiagarajan in 1980 while working for USAID in Gbarnga, Liberia. In this simulation, participants play a simple card game behind different tables. Every table has a different set of rules. After a certain time, participants switch the tables. The trick is that participants know only the rules of their first table and are prohibited from speaking, leading to conflicts as they move from table to table.

The game simulates real cross-cultural encounters, where people initially believe they share the same understanding of the basic rules but later discover that that's not the case. They experience mini-cultural shock and must find a way to understand and reconcile these differences to play the game effectively in their "cross-cultural" groups.

Process

Set up tables (about four people per table). On each table, there should be a copy of the rules for that table per player plus a deck of cards (use only A-10, no face cards). Let the participants play a few rounds with the rules and with talking allowed. Next, everything is removed from the playing tables. Play continues with everyone at their table. From now on, talking is prohibited.

Participants must switch tables after allowing a few rounds without talking at the home table. The person who won the most tricks moves clockwise to the next table, and the person who loses the most tricks moves counterclockwise to the next table. The players do not know that each table has learned different rules.

Each Table shares the following rules:

- Each round will be about 5 minutes long (longer if time allows), and each round will consist of any number of games the time allows.
- Players are dealt five cards each every game.
- The dealer can be anyone at the table; the person who plays first will be to the dealer's right.
- The first player for each trick may play ANY suit. All other players must follow suit (play a card of the same suit) and play only one card.
- If a player does not have that suit, a card of any suit must be played. The trick is won by the person with the HIGHEST card of the ORIGINAL suit.
- Players can track scores with a toothpick (one stick per trick won).
- Whoever wins the most tricks in the round will move clockwise to the next table.
- Whoever loses the most tricks in the round will move counterclockwise to the next table.
- Everyone else stays at the same table.
- After the initial round, players cannot see the rules or speak to each other. Gestures and pictures are allowed, but players are not allowed to use words.
- Game Paper, rock, scissors resolve ties.
- The all-game winner will be the person who has won the most tricks in total.

The Changing Rules

Depending on the number of players, rule sheets can be altered or discarded for the number of tables used. Some samples of rules are as follows:

- Table 1: Ace high, no trump.
- Table 2: Ace low, diamonds trump.

- Table 3: Ace low, clubs trump.
- Table 4: Ace high, hearts trump.
- Table 5: Ace high, spades trump.
- Table 6: Ace low, no trump.
- ...
- In all cases, other cards will be worth a face value of 10 high and 2 low.

After playing a number of rounds, either using a set time limit or allowing the number of rotations according to the number of tables in play (6 rounds for six tables), we invite participants to join us in the circle and have a debriefing.

Debriefing Questions Pool

- If you could describe the game in one word, what would it be?
- What did you expect at the beginning of the game?
- When did you realise that something was wrong? How did you deal with it? How did not being able to speak contribute to what you were feeling?
- How did you react to the feeling of injustice when somebody enforced their rules?
- What specific real-life situations does this game remind you of? What are the underlying causes of the problems or difficulties?
- What could different rules symbolise in real life? Where do we pick up these different rules?
- How do these rules define how we behave in interactions with people with different sets of rules?
- What could we do to improve these interactions?

With the debriefing, we lead the conversation that our experiences and values define how we see the world and the rules we play by. To be able to live in a society where, even in the same culture, we have some different rules coming from our backgrounds, we need to find a way to work together to be able to co-create an inclusive society to which we all can contribute.

Materials

Decks of cards (matching the number of tables), different rules for every table, and table islands for group work.

Tips and Tricks

The most important part of the method is debriefing, which connects the game to real life and supports participants' reflection on how they approach that kind of misunderstanding in their personal lives. During the game, you should observe the dynamics happening in the game and use them in the debriefing part (who won the conflicts in rules, how participants reacted to injustice, etc.).

Source

- Steinwachs, B., Thiagarajan, S. (1990). *Barnga*. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press.

Further Readings

- Game description: **Barnga** (QR 1).
- Amazon Books: *Barnga: A Simulation Game on Cultural Clashes – 25th Anniversary Edition* (QR 2).
- *Barnga: A Card Game for Culture-Stress Show and Tell* (QR 3).

1



2



3



Lifeline

Matej Cepin,
Socialna akademija

Learning Goals

Participants perceive changes as positive; they are no longer afraid to change.

Time

Around 1 hour.

Description

Lifeline is an exercise in reflecting on an individual's life from a particular point of view. As we recall more or less distant events, we also recognise the changes that have taken place in our lives. Through time, we experience both external and internal changes. Our thoughts, beliefs, and priorities change. These changes usually mean personal growth.

Each participant draws a straight line (timeline) on a horizontally placed piece of paper. On it, he/she marks his/her birth and the different periodic points in his/her life (5, 10, 15, 20, 25 ... years – depending on age). The present moment should also be marked. It is also possible to write years or different periods of life (e.g., birth, pre-school, lower primary school, upper primary school, high school, etc.) instead of ages.

The facilitator or the group chooses the "topic" (an aspect of life) to be shown on the timeline (e.g., my freedom, my relationships, or my social inclusion). The topic should be connected to the topic of the dialogue.

Each participant goes into solitude for about 20 minutes and marks the most important experiences and moments in the timeline in the chosen area. He/she can also present in the form of a graph whether he/she experienced these experiences as positive or negative.

Next, the timelines will be presented. This is usually done in groups of 4–5 participants. In this phase, participants are particularly invited to reflect on

the external and internal changes they have experienced in their lives. The following questions may help:

- What was it that made a particular experience important for you?
- When you look at your timeline, what challenges did you have to overcome in your chosen field? How did you cope with them?
- What successes and failures did you achieve through overcoming challenges?
- What did you learn along the way? What changes have happened to you?
- How do you look at these changes now, after all this time? Do you evaluate them as positive or negative?
- To what extent are you afraid of the changes that will happen to you in the future, perhaps through the dialogues you will take part in?

Materials

Papers and pens.

Tips and Tricks

If the age of the participants varies, pay attention to the fact that both younger and older participants will have approximately the same amount of time to share their experiences, regardless of the "length" of their lifeline.

Source

- *Urška Slana: Prisluškovanje življenju, Socialna akademija, 2012 (digital version, PDF), in Slovenian language.*



Lost at the Sea

Marija Šeme-Bonizzi,
IniciativAngola

Learning Goals

- Participants experience the decision-making process.
- Participants learn how to cooperate, look for solutions, and foster creative thinking.

Time

80 minutes.

Description

Lost at the Sea is a team-building activity to encourage interaction and team-work among young people. The chances of 'survival' depend on their ability to rank the salvaged items in relative order of importance. The most important aspect of the game is that they have to make a unanimous decision in a limited time.

Step-by-Step Instructions

The facilitator gives instructions and presents the rules and activities of the situation game "Lost at the Sea", see Annex 1.

The facilitator asks the participants to carefully read the rules of the game (if needed, the facilitator or one of the participants could read them aloud to the group).

After reading the instructions, the participants have 15 minutes to make individual rankings of the items in the list and to write their choices in the Step 1 column. No. 1 is the most important item and no. 15 – the least important. If needed, the items in the list could be explained in advance in case there are objects the participants are unfamiliar with.

The facilitator divides the group into smaller teams of 3–4 persons. Each team has 30 minutes to discuss their individual rankings of the 15 items and come

up with a common decision on how to rate the items from most to least important. Each team has to write the common ranking in the Step 2 column. The facilitator should explain to the groups that they have limited time to make a unanimous decision! If they cannot agree on it, the team loses the game.

The correct answers were suggested by the US Coast Guard – Annex 2. The facilitator should display the "expert" rankings on a PowerPoint presentation, whiteboard, or photocopy. The participants have to compare their individual and group answers with the correct answers and determine a score.

In order to calculate the score, for each item, the group should mark the number of points that their score differs from the Coast Guard ranking and then add up all the points. Disregard plus or minus differences. The lower the total, the better the score. For example, if an item is put in position no. 5 by a participant or a team, but the experts have put it in position no. 10, the difference is 5 points.

After the teams make the necessary calculations, if necessary, with the assistance of the facilitator, the results chart should be presented to the group – Annex 3.

As the groups work together, sharing thoughts and ideas, this should produce an improved score over the individual results.

Reflection

At the end of the game, the facilitator has a discussion with all groups that were formed during the activities about their performance. The main topic of the discussion should be related to the process of their decision-making and guiding the participants to adapt the process on a societal level.

Here are just some suggestions for the questions that the facilitator might ask:

- Why do the individual results differ from the group results?
- What led to an agreement?
- Was it difficult to make a unanimous decision?

- What are the characteristics of successful decision-making? Why is this important?
- On which level does this process mirror our society? Can you name some examples?
- Can you think of any situation in your life where the process that we tested in this workshop could come in handy?
- After this experience, do you think you would react in any other way? Name some examples.

Materials

Paper sheets, pens, coloured pencils, printed Annex for Lost at the Sea.

Tips and Tricks

Carefully read the instructions and the solution in advance in order to be prepared to manage the process and guide the participants.

Source

- *Idea based on gestalt pedagogy method and on the activity described in the manual: Educ'action, A catalogue of non-formal education methods, 2018, p. 60.*

Further Readings

- *Annexes 1, 2 and 3 (pages 63–66) in Educ'action: A Catalogue on Non-Formal Education Methods (PDF).*



Nonviolent Communication in Practice

Alice Straniero and Diana Todorova,
Documenta

Learning Goals

- Participants understand how to navigate disagreements through non-violent communication and the importance of using I sentences in dialogue.

Time

70 minutes.

Description

The participants exercise the application of the process of nonviolent communication. The main point of the exercise is for the participants to clearly state how they feel, without accusing or criticising others, and to become more able to clearly ask for what they would like to achieve, but without demanding.

Warm-up

Speed-dating method in pairs, discussing the following questions (15 min):

- How do you usually handle conversations that are tough for you?
- Do you usually avoid difficult conversations with your friends and family so that you don't cause a conflict?
- How do you stick up for your opinion when others don't agree with it?

Define the concept of non-violent communication (find it in the previous chapter of this manual) and why it is important (10 min).

Activity

Divided into pairs, the participants explore non-violent communication (30 min). They can try the following examples:

- Your roommate is leaving dirty dishes in the sink every night. You would like them to clean them in the evening, so you can have breakfast in a clean kitchen.

- Your mom always enters your room while you study. You would like her to knock before coming in.
- One of your colleagues didn't mention you in the work that you helped create. You address the issue with them.
- It's your birthday. Your partner organised for you a night out, but you are tired and would prefer to stay at home.
- You are taking part in a summer school. You start with the sessions at 9:00 and have lunch at 12:00. Part of the group would like to sleep longer and have lunch later, around 14:00. You are used to having lunch at 12:00, and like the current schedule, you would like to keep the time-table.

The participants go through the situations, following the structure:

- **Observation:** what I perceive (see, hear, remember, imagine, without my interpretations) that contributes (or not) to my well-being: "When (I see, hear) ..."



- **Feeling:** how I feel (feeling or sensation rather than thought) about what I perceive: "... I feel ..."
- **Needs:** what I need or value (instead of a concrete action): "... because I need/value ..."
- **Request:** concrete actions that I would like to happen "... would you be willing to ...?"

Reflection (15 minutes)

The trainer leads the reflection session following the questions:

- How did you feel communicating non-violently in these situations?
- What did you find most useful during the activity?
- How are you going to use this method of communicating in your everyday life?

Materials

Papers with the 4 steps and the situations.

Tips and Tricks

If the group is not familiar at all with non-violent communication, the trainer could present one of the situations both through violent and non-violent interactions.

Source

- Leu, L., & Rosenberg, M. B. (2015). *In Nonviolent communication companion workbook: A practical guide for individual, group, or classroom study*. Essay, Puddle Dancer Press.

Asking Questions That Matter

Matej Cepin,
Socialna akademija

Learning Goals

- Participants are empowered to understand, set and answer powerful questions.

Time

Around 50 minutes.

Description

Introductory Motivation (5 minutes)

The trainer/facilitator asks participants:

- How do you usually respond to the question: 'How are you?'
- On a scale of 0 to 5, where 0 means a 'weak question' and 5 means an 'exceptionally strong question,' how would you rate it?

Theory (from 10 to 15 minutes)

The trainer/facilitator briefly explains:

1. Which factors make a question powerful?

- Personal connection, relevance, challenging assumptions, encouraging reflection, generating curiosity, stimulating creativity, etc.

2. Examples of different levels of the power of questions:

- Surface-level Questions, for example: "Have you done your homework?"
- Exploratory Questions, for example: "What other options have you considered?"
- Reflective Questions, for example: "How did that make you feel?"
- Challenging Questions, for example: "What beliefs are holding you back from making a change?"
- Visionary Questions, for example: "What would it look like if everything went perfectly?"
- Empowering Questions, for example: "What strengths can you leverage to overcome this challenge?"



Crafting Powerful Questions – Individual Work (5 – 10 minutes)

Instruction: Imagine a challenging life situation you're facing (e.g., changing jobs, contemplating personal vocation, considering relocation, realising your potential, etc.). Based on the guidelines from the theory section, prepare 3 strong questions for this situation. Write each question on a separate card in a way that a fellow participant can easily read it.

Testing Powerful Questions – Work in pairs (15 minutes)

Instruction: Hand your cards to your partner and briefly describe the life situation the questions refer to. Allow him/her to ask you these questions. He/she can also modify them slightly if needed. Halfway through the time, you both switch roles.

Reflection on the Exercise – Whole Group Discussion (10 minutes)

Discussion revolves around the following prompts:

- Which questions proved to be the most powerful?
- After experiencing this exercise, how would you answer the question about what makes questions powerful?

- Imagine a situation in the future when you meet someone you are close to. Think of one powerful question you would ask that person! Why?

Materials

- Board and markers,
- cards and pens.

Tips and Tricks

Through time and experience, you can develop your concept of levels of powerful questions.

Further Readings

- *51 Powerful Questions to Ask in Different Situations, and The Art of Asking Powerful Questions (QR 1).*
- *How to Design powerful Questions (QR 2).*



RAIN Method

Sabina Belc,
Socialna akademija

Learning Goals

- Participants try out the method for emotional regulation.

Time

60 minutes.

Description

Warm-up (15 minutes)

The facilitator invites participants to choose one Dixit (reflective) card, which reminds them of the situation when they were overwhelmed with emotions that influenced their behaviour. They should choose one which they are willing to share with others.

Introduction (10 minutes)

The facilitator explains that RAIN is a tool for practising mindfulness when we feel overwhelmed by our thoughts and emotions.

The acronym RAIN is an easy-to-remember tool for bringing mindfulness and compassion to emotional difficulty.

Recognise what is going on;

Allow the experience to be there, just as it is;

Investigate with curiosity;

Non-Identify.

The facilitator shares that to be able to use it, we can practice on small, not-so-important events after they have already happened. With regular practice, we are then able to apply it even in difficult situations.

Activity (20 minutes)

The facilitator invites them to think of one situation they would like to try this method and then leads them step by step through the process. Then, s/he sets

the atmosphere with music and invites the group to close their eyes, relax and breathe deeply. For every step, they should take a few minutes; the most important is to encourage them to deeply investigate the inner experience (3rd step).

R: Recognise → Recognise What is Going On.

We are constantly interacting with our environments, and our brain processes this feedback. When a person is experiencing stress or anxiety, their brain will process the outside information differently. By recognising what is going on in your mind and body at such times, you can learn to identify the causes of your stress and create a plan to improve things. Recall your situation and think about what happened in that situation.

A: Allow → Allow the Experience to be There, Just as It is.

When you have a disturbing thought or feeling, don't judge it. Instead, acknowledge and accept it. Thoughts are just that: thoughts. They aren't always based on reality. So, remind yourself that your thoughts do not define you. You do not have to hold on to them. Allow them to come up and go. Imagine yourself standing on your patio, watching a crowd of people and cars pass by down on the street below.

I: Investigate → Investigate Your Inner Experience.

Making sense of the world can be daunting when you have many unpleasant thoughts together. In such situations, asking questions about what you are experiencing can help you to understand the world better and find joy in living. If you feel overwhelmed, explore what exactly is making you feel this way, why it is happening, and how you might help yourself get through it. Bring your curious mind and leave judgement out of it.

N: Non-Identify →

Let go of your judgements and self-criticism associated with that particular feeling. Even when you feel a certain emotion rising inside, you do not have to act on it. Let you, as your good friend, have a relaxing conversation with yourself. Tell yourself, "Emotions are a natural part of living, but I am not my emotions. So I allow myself to un-identify with this emotion."

Reflection (15 minutes)

- How do you feel after trying the method? Did it give you a new perspective?
- Which step was the most challenging? Which one is the most powerful?
- How do you think it could apply to your life? Where could it come in handy?

Materials

Dixit (reflective cards) and music.

Tips and Tricks

Brave space gives a floor for challenging opinions, so we need to empower participants on how to deal with them. The RAIN method helps us manage our responses and supports us in dealing with opinions that can trigger us. This activity can be used as a response to conflict arising or as a part of the process, but it shouldn't be one of the first activities. We can connect the activity to Albert Ellis's ABC Model from Cognitive-behavioural therapy.

We invite participants to choose one experience that is not too triggering. We start practising this method in simple situations to get to know and internalise the process. Later, it becomes a part of our routine and can also be applied in the heat of the moment.

Source

- *Michele McDonald.*

Additional information

- **R.A.I.N. Method of Mindfulness Meditation (QR 1).**
- **RAIN: A Practice of Radical Compassion (QR 2).**



The Backpack of My Life

Marija Šeme-Bonizzi,
IniciativAngola

Learning Goals

Participants explore the impact of experiences on their lives and perceptions of the world around them.

Time

About 60 minutes.

Description

The main aim of this method is to help participants raise awareness about their backpacks, improve their ability to recognise their emotions and reactions towards people and situations in their own lives, develop empathy towards themselves and others, understand the relation between past experiences (e.g., different events, outspoken word, etc.) and their impact, analyse situations, look for solutions, and "forgiveness" for personal insults.

The facilitator should ensure enough personal space for each participant. Participants receive an A4 blank paper sheet or sheet with a drawing of a backpack. If the paper is blank, the participants should draw the backpack themselves.

The facilitator invites participants to reflect on events, phrases, sentences, and words that marked them throughout their lifetime – positive and negative (that's why it is important to ensure privacy for each participant!). Participants, in 10 minutes (or 15 if they need to draw), write the most relevant experiences, phrases, words, and sentences in the backpack.

Participants can even choose different colours for different experiences related to different people, e.g., green for family members, blue for school friends, orange for teachers, etc. The facilitator invites the participants to circle 3 events that, in their opinion, had or have the strongest influence on them.

Afterwards, participants receive a second sheet of blank paper or an Annex below and choose one event, word, phrase, or sentence followed by reflection and answering the following questions (20 minutes):

- Describe the situation in which this event happened or of a particular word, sentence, or phrase spoken. What happened?
- Why do I think this happened? What were the possible reasons for the person involved doing/saying what they did?
- How did I feel afterwards? What thought could spark these feelings and emotions?
- What does this event, word, phrase, or sentence from the past say about me? How did it influence me? Did I change something about myself or my life?
- How do I see that event, word, phrase, or sentence today? How do I see the people involved?

If time permits, they repeat the same process with other circulated events, words, phrases, and sentences. Some extra paper sheets may be needed. The facilitator can invite participants to share what they have written down and ask them about the process. As it may be very personal, the facilitator has to ensure that participants do not need to share anything if they do not wish to.

However, evaluation and reflection are very important parts of the method. After the activity is concluded, the facilitator can ask the following questions for reflection and evaluation:

- Which of the questions was the most difficult to complete? Why? Which was the easiest?
- Have you changed your point of view toward the involved person after thinking about their motivation and reasons for doing or saying certain things in a particular way?
- How do your emotions and mood at the time of an event influence your memory of it and its impact on you? Could different reactions or behaviours have resulted in different outcomes?
- How does this exercise relate to your daily life? What insights can you take from it and apply to your life?

The facilitator can explain afterwards that past experiences, which we remember the most, are like the constant backpacks that we carry around during our lives. Especially those that we experienced at a young age related to our significant others specially mark us.

Negative but also positive affirmations from others about us can be limiting and do not tell the (whole) truth. When growing up and in adulthood, we have the right to decide if we still want to believe those experiences – carrying them in our backpacks – or not. Reflecting and reviewing the situation in which certain things happened or certain words, phrases, and sentences were spoken help us to understand the other and their "why" better and, therefore, lose the power of possible resentment towards that person.

After the activity, the facilitator mentions that resentment is a normal emotion that affects every human being. However, it is important to recognise this emotion and, when emotionally ready, seek ways of dialogue that can empower your life with new experiences.

Materials

Paper sheets, pens, coloured pencils, possibly printed Annexes, and pictures of a backpack.

Tips and Tricks

It is necessary to foresee time for personal work. Do not hurry up the process; silence breaks are recommended.

Additionally, the facilitator can introduce the ABC model about reactions to certain events that happened in their life. ABC stands for:

- A (Adversity or Activating event): An external event or situation that triggers their emotional response.
- B (Beliefs): Their thoughts and interpretations about the event. They can be both obvious and underlying.
- C (Consequences): Includes their behavioural or emotional reaction.

More information about the model can be found here: **ABC Model of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy: How it Works** ([healthline.com](https://www.healthline.com/health/abc-model-of-cognitive-behavioral-therapy)).

Participants are invited to try to identify thoughts and/or beliefs that sparked the reaction to the event or outspoken word. They try to find possible alternative thoughts or beliefs which could support better reactions.

Source

- *Idea based on gestalt pedagogy method and the activity described in the manual: Educ'action, A catalogue of non-formal education methods, 2018, p. 140.*

Further Readings

- **Educ'action: A Catalogue on Non-Formal Education Methods (PDF).**



Trio Story Sharing

Sabina Belc,
Socialna akademija

Learning Goals

- Participants recognise the power of questions and story-sharing.
- Participants practice conscious listening.

Time

90 minutes.

Description

The method of Trio Story sharing has its roots in the Appreciative Inquiry approach. Storytelling is an easy way to reawaken our memory of what we've experienced and who we are. At the same time, once a story is shared, it can begin to be seen in a new light from the side of the storyteller and can serve as an inspiration for what works for the rest of the group.

Working in Trios

It is a rotating roles exercise, where each person will take on one of three roles during the 60-minute practice. Each participant will take on the role of storyteller and be in the focus for 15 minutes – with about 10 minutes telling the story and 5 minutes for the others to give feedback. After participants take all three roles, the final 15 minutes is when the trio prepares what it will bring back to the whole group.

Three roles are:

- **Storyteller:** Respond to the question with a personal story.
- **Harvester:** Invite the story by asking the question. Focus on the content of the story. What were the elements that made the story a success?
- **Witness:** Invite the story by keeping eye contact with the storyteller. Focus on the person. What strengths/uniqueness did the storyteller show in the story?

Invitation Question

The crucial part of the method is to propose a powerful question. Ask yourself: What do you want to focus on or awaken in people?

Examples of questions that can support work on dialogue could be:

- Tell about a time when you dared to take a risk or converse on a difficult topic that mattered. What did you learn then that stays with you now?
- Tell about a time when you faced diversity, and it changed you. What was the change, and how did it influence your life?
- Tell me about the intensive conflict you were part of that was later solved.

Group Sharing

Each group brings back two to three points about the subject we've been working on to share. Coming back together as a whole group gives everyone a chance to share what we've learned about the qualities we've been exploring, leading to deeper discussion. Points shared could then be used to base the rest of the workshop.

Materials

Paper with a description of roles and invitation question.

Tips and Tricks

The setup is vital for this exercise to be as powerful and connecting as possible. We need to create a safe(r) space so that people feel supported to be self-revealing.

The quality of listening can make or break a story. We invite participants to listen with awe and wonder to find someone else's brilliance.

Source

- *Mary Alice Arthur (Story Activist).*

Further Readings

- *Trio Storysharing Guide (QR).*



Trust Circles

*Sabina Belc and Eva Povalej,
Socialna akademija*

Learning Goals

Participants build up an understanding of the levels of trust among people.

Time

45 minutes.

Description

Trust Circle is a simple activity that helps us visualise our relationships. It helps us identify which people we trust the most, what kind of influence they have on us, and how easily we trust people, but mainly it helps us get to know how we act in our relationships and what practical steps we can take to feel closer to people and form more meaningful connections.

This activity consists of multiple concentric circles with the names of the people in our lives. The more we trust a person, the closer their name is to the centre.

The participants are invited to draw 5 circles within each other.

1. The innermost circle is named SELF (your own name).
2. The second circle is for CONFIDANTS (people you feel closest to).
3. The third circle is for CLOSE FRIENDS (people you can pick up right where you left off).
4. The fourth circle is for TRUE FRIENDS (people who support you).
5. The last circle is for DISTANT FRIENDS (people you just do activities with).

When all participants finish with their circles, they form a group of 4 people and answer some of the following questions among themselves:

- What criteria did you use when deciding which people to write in which circle?

- What characteristics do you value most in people you trust?
- What kind of relationship do you have with the people closest to the centre? What kind of person are you when you are with them?
- How quickly do you trust people and let them in? Do you think all people deserve to be in the circle you chose for them?
- How much do you trust yourself? Are you truly in the centre of your trust? Do you trust yourself in every situation or only in certain ones?



After they finish sharing, they join the whole group where the facilitator connects the activity to the bigger picture with questions like:

- How diverse are people in your trust circle when it comes to values and the way they look at the world?

- Have you disagreed on certain points with people in your trust circle? Do you have a friend who challenges you?
- What would need to happen that you would place people you disagree with in the context of political views or values in your trust circle? Is it possible to trust people you don't share all the values with?
- Do you think there is a benefit to bringing diverse people closer into your life?

Materials

Sheets of paper, pens, an example of the circle (like the picture above), and questions to discuss in the small groups.

Tips and Tricks

You should start with your personal life, which is easier to think about. We let them start in smaller groups so they can share more openly. Later, invite them to think about the bigger picture. About dialogue support them with thought-provoking questions.

Source

- *Natalie Lue.*

Further Readings

- *Circles of Trust Tool (video).*





Practical Tips for Implementation

Written by the project team,
collected by Sanja Obaha Brodnjak, Socialna akademija

From One Youth Worker to Another ...

After running dialogical workshops and dialogical events multiple times with young people of different ages and cultural backgrounds, we've found that a few key insights can make a big difference.

Here are some practical tips and recommendations to help you create a more engaging and meaningful experience.

Adapting Activities to Participants' Age and Background

- High school students (typically aged 14–18) often struggle with expressing their opinions, especially in their own class. They require more encouragement and structured activities to engage in discussion.
- University students (typically aged 18–24) are generally more open and willing to share their experiences.

- Encourage quiet self-reflection before discussing relevant topics, allowing students to express themselves and feel acknowledged. This could be done by offering 3–5 minutes of time in silence or with quiet music.
- Consider participants' cultural, religious, and political backgrounds when planning activities, adapting your approach based on the group's diversity.
- When pairing participants for discussions or exercises, ensure enough contrasting perspectives to encourage meaningful dialogue.

Creating Engaging and Inclusive Activities

- A practical exercise using a cardboard box with holes, where participants view a LEGO figure from different angles, encourages perspective-taking and problem-solving.
- Sometimes, spontaneous moments arise: allow the group to take charge of problem-solving rather than rigidly following the plan.
- Have a plan but stay flexible. With younger participants, start with an experience, such as a game or interactive method, before opening discussion and presenting guidelines. Always prepare one or two backup activities in case adjustments are needed.

Setting the Right Environment

- Arrange chairs in a circle to encourage open communication and inclusivity.
- Ensure chairs are easily movable to adapt to different activities.
- For in-person workshops, an ideal session length is 3 x 45 minutes with a 15-minute break. Online sessions should not exceed 90 minutes.
- If the workshop is conducted in schools, it is preferable that only the workshop leader (plus a technical assistant) is present, without teachers, to create a more open environment.

- During the speed dating activity, create a pleasant atmosphere, such as a bar-like setting, and include snacks and drinks.

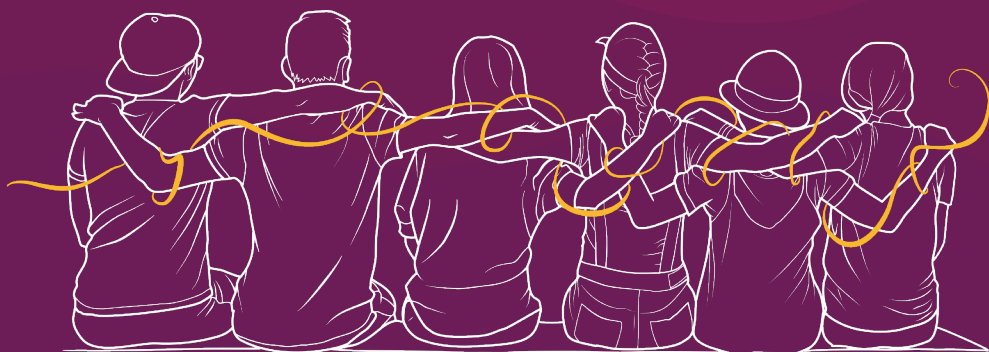
Encouraging Respectful Communication

- Establish a shared vocabulary at the beginning of the session to help participants use appropriate language, especially when discussing sensitive topics.
- Develop "Workshop Rules" together with participants to set expectations for respectful behaviour. Display these rules on a poster as a reminder.
- Personal stories from facilitators are often well received and help create an engaging and relatable atmosphere.
- Connect discussions to real-life issues that are relevant to the participants.

Managing Technical and Logistical Challenges

- If participants have language barriers, simplify the text and instructions.
- If the group is not a familiar community, it is worth having at least two get-to-know-you games in the group so that the atmosphere is more relaxed.
- Expect technical challenges: having an extra person available to handle them is beneficial.
- Begin sessions with a short check-in (e.g., "How are you?") to help participants transition into the workshop setting.
- When using an application, be mindful of screen time and attention span: long periods in the application may cause distractions.

By applying these practical tips, facilitators can turn dialogical workshops or dialogical events into meaningful, engaging, and effective learning experiences for young participants.



Organisations Behind the Project

Socialna akademija

A non-profit organisation based in Ljubljana, Slovenia, that promotes personal development and social engagement of young people and adults.

Its programs cover civic literacy, social participation, leadership, and youth work. It operates on local, national, and international levels.

In Slovenia and beyond Socialna akademija is recognised for its high-quality trainings, youth project management, the civic literacy platform razgledan.si, a rich YouTube channel, and a series of dozens of publications for youth workers and community workers.





IniciativAngola

IniciativAngola is a global youth aid NGO focused on national and international youth support and sustainable development.



Through various projects, it fosters solidarity and responsibility among young people for their peers in Africa. The organisation empowers them to engage in community awareness by organising beneficiary events and projects according to their interests and talents.

These events help support schools, kindergartens, libraries, etc., of their project partners in Angola, Mozambique and Ethiopia.



Documenta

Documenta is a civil society organisation founded in 2004 in Zagreb, Croatia. It's mission is to engage different social structures in the social process of dealing with the past, through dialogue.



Through its work, Documenta is promoting human rights and non-violence, developing non-formal educational methods, and involving youth in active dialogue about the past.

Documenta contributes to the development of individual and social processes of dealing with the past, in order to build sustainable peace in Croatia and the region.

Kathaz Ltd.

The mission of the Kathaz is to create a bridge between the scenes of church and civil life in Szeged and in the region.

With our programs, training and services, we provide space for religious and cultural events in the Southern Great Plain region, and we provide opportunities for different generations and communities to meet.

Kathaz, as a community and training institution, contributes to the social empowerment of young people in the region.



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