

Facilitating Discussions and Conversations

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Learning Goals:

- Explore the power of conversation in community and network building.
- Identify resources for building skills that facilitate conversations.

I'd like to tell a story...

My first online interaction experience was in what I call an "online conversation community", a place whose purpose was to provide stimulating conversation among of people who returned again and again to interact.

I cut my teeth in Howard Rheingold's Electric Minds community in 1996. I felt like Alice, stepping through the looking glass and down the rabbit hole into an entirely new world. It was a place that was a buzz with a combination of intellect, wit and connection. I was amazed.

Once I assembled the courage and jumped into some of the conversations, I was swept into a world that extended far beyond boundaries of geography, culture and ideas familiar to me. I began connecting and learning like crazy.



Can participating in an online conversation community be considered a transformative experience? Some say it is "all talk and no action?" For me, it was transformative.

About 9 months after joining Electric Minds I was laid off from a high tech job with no warning. I felt I was falling off of a professional cliff, and this group of conversationalists "caught me" and helped me through a difficult period.

Over time as I traveled for my work, I met many of my online community friends face to face (F2F) and formed relationships that endured outside of the online interaction space. The experience taught me that through sharing bits of ourselves through conversation, we had developed connection, relationship and community.

And because of the network nature of the Internet, I formed many looser connections to a larger group of people and ideas than was contained in the original online group.

Conversation supports groups -->which build community --> which connects us to networks.

The progression from groups, to communities, to networks can provide results for thematic knowledge networks (TKNs). Here is how. Many, if not most, people don't have the time to log on and have online conversations. Few will choose to engage deeply. But those who do engage in conversation become the transmitters of ideas and communication in the networks. They are the core members of smaller groups. They become the connections between the nodes to a larger network. So conversation can be one of the life-forces of networks, even if only some participate. Conversation also builds sociability and group cohesion through that apply to knowledge sharing and task work later in the process.

Because we focus on goals and concrete outcomes, we might think that facilitating for task and action is our key role, but it is useful to explore and experience what conversation and discussion can do for a group, even if the results aren't immediately apparent. Explore the possibilities. Think about the conversations in the hall, in the cafeteria, about the weather or sports or the news. Think of how they help us get a sense of others. To find out who knows what. To connect.

"Hosting" conversations?

I was influenced by Howard Rheingold's facilitation style that sprung from one of the first and most enduring online communities, The [Well](#). When I think about how to facilitate conversation, I think of Howard's seminal piece, [The Art of Hosting Good Conversations Online](#), and Gail William's [Online Community Building Concepts](#). They both suggest that facilitating online conversations was much like hosting good party. This includes:

- Creating a welcoming environment.
- Facilitating relationship building such as introducing people to one another.
- Sparking conversation.
- Gently diverting energy from negative activities.

As we reflect back to the basic definitions of facilitation which include neutrality, we may view hosting as more engaged in the conversation itself than perhaps a facilitator would be. Alternatively, we can look at other conversational models such as storytelling. We can use the sharing of stories to accelerate learning and help us evaluate our work and stimulate conversation in a way different than a more intentional focus on the conversation itself. So consider the different approaches and styles to facilitating conversation.

Do a Google search on the “Power of Conversation” and you will find that this is a cornerstone of much of the current work in knowledge management. Here is a quick bit of inspiration I found from one of those hits:

When minds meet, they don't just exchange facts: they transform them, reshape them, draw different implications from them, and engage in new trains of thought. Conversation doesn't just reshuffle the cards; it creates new cards. Theodore Zeldin

Here's another example from a South African network

(<http://www.cdra.org.za/nuggets/Jazzing%20up%20conversation%20by%20Desiree%20Paulse%20-%20September%202004%20Nugget.htm>) which shares practices and qualities of conversation:

The practice of conversation

1. We acknowledge each other as equals.
2. We try to stay curious about each other.
3. We recognise the need to help each other become better listeners.
4. We slow down so we have time to think and reflect.
5. We remember that conversation is the natural way humans talk together.
6. We expect it to be messy at times

Four qualities are significant in the design of dialogue:

- **Voice** – creating a place for all relevant perspectives and attitudes to be spoken so that they may be heard.
- **Listening** – attention to the spoken and unspoken nature of the conversation and the “acoustics” of the space in the room.
- **Respect** – the acknowledgement of the value of differences and participants' identities.
- **Suspension** – the willingness to raise and consider assumptions and perceptions without being bound by them.

Let's take a moment to think together about how and when conversation can be used in your networks. As an example, look around our workshop space.

- What role does formal and informal conversation play in our interaction?
- How do we deepen conversation into inquiry and dialog?
- How can it help you in your work? And when would it be a distraction?