



Hosting in the Time of Pandemic: Online Conversation Cafés

Congratulations! Choosing to host a conversation online during these extraordinary days of the pandemic is a bold step. We are happy to have you join this experiment and celebration of the **power of conversation**. *If there was ever a time in human history when the people of the world needed to sit down and speak, listen and learn together, this is it.*

Conversation Cafe has grown from an idea to a proven simple method that people anywhere can learn and use to have a meaningful conversation. We know that Conversation Cafés foster: **Connection, wisdom, empowerment, and democracy.**

What is the role of a host? Hosts are vital to the success of every Conversation Cafe. We call you a host rather than a facilitator as you do not need professional training or experience and you get to be a participant. Your key role is to:

- Provide a safe, welcoming environment for strangers to shift from small talk to BIG talk.
- Provide the topic.
- Conduct a simple process that practically runs itself.
- Manage time.
- Convene people so they can still be connected during these times of social isolation.

How do I get people to come? Your enthusiasm and direct invitation will attract people. People are curious and they may be feeling isolated – they want to hear what others think and feel. You can start small and do it with your neighbors or book club friends. Or you can be more ambitious and approach colleagues or organizations to participate and co-host with you – such as a synagogue, church or Rotary club. You can invite people yourself, or set up a Facebook event, share on Instagram, Twitter, NextDoor, etc. – and send an email invitation with the links and ask everyone to forward to others. Consider enlisting a friend, neighbor or co-worker as a ‘co-host’ to help you create this conversation.

If you are interested in hosting an event that is open to a broader audience, you can post your event to NCDD’s [Community Events Calendar](#). To post, [fill out the form here](#).

How to schedule on Zoom? You can register for a free Zoom account – which allows meetings of up to 40 minutes (paid accounts are unlimited). Zoom is waiving this time limit for K-12 teachers - check the website for details. If you anticipate having a large group (more than 8 to 10), you will need familiarity with the break-out room function on Zoom. (Look for the instructions later in this packet). Choose the time and date that you think will work best for your target audience. Set up the meeting so you generate a Zoom link to send. 90 minutes is a good duration to aim for; encourage people to log in 10 to 15 minutes early so any technical glitches can get resolved. If you are using a free account, you will likely need to take a moment to close the session and re-open - this only takes a minute and participants do not need to leave or re-join.

Conversation Cafe Resources - At www.conversationcafe.org you will find materials for your use, including:

- [“Mini CC Guide”](#): introduces the Process and Agreements.
- [Suggested Questions](#): potential questions to use in your conversation
- [Sample Email Invitation](#): to use in recruiting participants

Overview of the Process: How to host using the Conversation Café Method

The Conversation Café process almost facilitates itself. Just as a host for parties or gatherings—you get things started and keep them going, boosted by a warm welcome and smile.

What, generally, makes a good conversation? Many things: an alive topic of interest to all, an open and receptive mood, people willing to listen as much as speak, a willingness to drop preconceptions and explore many different ideas, a comfortable setting in which people can easily hear each other, a group small enough for everyone to speak. At its best, such conversation gets deeper and richer the longer it can be sustained.

Setting the Stage: Opening the Conversation Café

Open the room early. As your participants arrive in the Zoom room, greet and chat with them. Once it is the designated time for starting, welcome all and invite them to write their name and location into the chat. Then state the theme or topic for the Café. Be sure to paste it into the chat, too. Come to agreement about the ending time (90 minutes is best, 60 minutes at minimum). Get everyone's agreement to stay till the end. If someone has to leave early, it's important to know in advance so the group will not be disrupted.

Agreements:

Next, read the Agreements out loud. The introduction of these Agreements begins to mark the shift from ordinary chit-chat to the wiser, generative depths at a slower pace of 'being-in-time.' Paste Agreements into the chat and/or paste a link to the [Mini Guide](#). You could have each person read one of the Agreements.

Open-mindedness: listen to and respect all points of view.

Acceptance: suspend judgment as best you can.

Curiosity: seek to understand rather than persuade.

Discovery: question assumptions, look for new insights.

Sincerity: speak from your heart and personal experience.

Brevity: go for honesty and depth but don't go on and on.

After reviewing each of these agreements, make sure you get everyone's buy-in: On Zoom, they can click on "Participants" at the bottom of their screen and then click on "raise hand" to give their consent. Or you can ask everyone to raise their hand if their video is on.

The Process

After reading the agreements, explain the process. There will be two rounds with a (virtual) **Talking Object**, then open conversation, and lastly a final round where each will reflect on their experience.

Introduce and explain the Talking Object in this context. It is a powerful tool for creating equality: Everyone in the circle - on the screen - has an equal voice, an equal turn. As a listener in the circle, we know our task is to listen to whoever is designated as holding the Talking Object, without interjecting or commenting. When we hold the Talking Object, we know we have the floor. We can pass if we don't want to speak. Online, the 'virtual Talking Object' is given to the person who is unmuted: all participants are on mute until it is their turn. You, as the host, unmute the next speaker. The transition of mute, unmute gives a nice slow pace to the round.

Before beginning Round 1, invite people to be **silent** for a few moments to quiet their minds and collect their thoughts.

Round 1: Go around the circle once, inviting each to speak to what is in their heart and mind regarding the theme (people can pass if they like). Remarks should be succinct (1-2 min) to allow time for everyone to speak. As the speaker with the virtual Talking Object, they are the only one off mute. When they are through speaking, they mute themselves

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and you unmute the next person. Listen to each person, with no feedback or response. Remind people that it's not necessary for their comments to match the previous ones – a time will come when we are more conversational. It is wise for you, as host, to begin, so you can model the *depth and brevity* of the desired response.

Round 2: Go around the circle again, with the Talking Object, giving each person another chance to speak without feedback or response. Explain how in this round people may deepen their own comments or speak to what has meaning for them now; they can also respond to what others have said. (OR – there may be a different question for the Second Round). Request that everyone keep their comments brief so that most of the time will be available for the open back and forth that follows the second round. Remind them, still no cross talk.

The Middle: Now it is time to open up the conversation. Unmute everyone and let the conversation begin. Suggest that speakers raise their hand to indicate they want to speak next (briefly and not in a distracting way); and offer that whoever is speaking can hand off to the next speaker by naming them. Seek to follow and enrich the thread of new meaning and insights that arise – rather than enforcing any topic. It's fine to end up somewhere unexpected and different from the initial question!

Mind the Time: About five or ten minutes before the final round time (i.e. 15 to 20 minutes before ending time), tell the group it is time to begin to bring the conversation to a close.

The Final Round: About five to ten minutes before the ending time, introduce the final round. This timing depends on the size of the group – you'll need more time the larger the group and if you've had break out groups, leave time for a collective final round once everyone comes back together.

Ask the group to take a minute to think about this experience: as an option, you may invite them to write a few words in the chat, which you can then collect to use as a record of the insights that came. Then, invite each person to briefly express what they are taking from this conversation: what touched, moved, inspired or challenged you? This is like the first two rounds, using the virtual Talking Object. Close by thanking each other.

Regarding late comers: In case people drift in and join after the starting time -- make sure they are muted... Allow newcomers to just observe and then join in when their turn comes. You can send them a private chat to welcome them and give a link to the Mini Guide to review the process, with emphasis on the agreements.

For larger groups: If there are more than ten people, it's best to divide into two (or more) separate groups so everyone will have time to be heard. The dividing can happen right after this point, now that you've explained the process and shared the Agreements. Refer to the "Large Group Appendix" for more information.

...and then

Share the story of your Cafe! Post on social media using hashtags #ConvoCafe and #WeavingCommunity so that our team can help share, too.

Invite participants to learn more about Conversation Cafe at www.conversationcafe.org. They may wish to host their own Cafe! Everyone is also welcome to become a part of the community of Conversation Cafe hosts. Fill out the brief form at <http://www.conversationcafe.org/main-survey/> and let us know how you would like to engage.

Appendix: Dividing into Small Groups

After reviewing and committing to the Agreements and explaining the process, you can send participants into small groups of 4 to 8. You can add yourself to one of the groups after you send everyone off to their break outs.

Before you send them off to break outs, paste in the questions and the directions for the volunteer host: (once they are in the break outs, they can not see any additions to the chat)

“Host: begin each round; everyone should be on mute during the two rounds - you indicate who should unmute when it is their turn as you go around the circle so everyone speaks once. During the Open Conversation, help ‘direct traffic:’ each speaker can designate who goes next after they speak - and they can watch for participants who raise their physical hand. When you receive the message to begin the Closing Round, ask everyone to mute again. Pause to reflect. Then indicate who should unmute to share, one by one.”

How to Set Up Break Out Rooms on Zoom

You must enable the break-out function on your account before your meeting! Sign in to [Zoom.us](https://zoom.us) to edit your settings.

1. Click Account Management > [Account Settings](#).
2. Navigate to the Breakout Room option on the Meeting tab and verify that the setting is enabled. If the setting is disabled, click the toggle to enable it. If a verification dialog displays, choose Turn On to verify the change.

Breakout room

Allow host to split meeting participants into separate, smaller rooms 

Allow host to assign participants to breakout rooms when scheduling

3. (Optional) Click the checkbox to allow meeting hosts to [pre-assign participants to breakout rooms](#).

It may take a bit of time to move back and forth, especially for those with slow internet connection. If you have many with slow connections ask participants to be patient and wait a bit in their room, rather than assuming no one else is coming). It is best to keep the group you are in out of the breakouts and use the Main Room as the meeting space for your group.

Keep track of the time once the breakouts begin

1. About 15 minutes before the ending of the whole session, give a five minute warning to the break out rooms.
2. Five minutes later, send another message, “Closing Round with ‘Talking Object:’ What are you taking from this conversation? What surprised you? Or moved or touched you? Or inspired you? Or challenged you?”
3. After five minutes, close the break out rooms. After initiating calling people back (closing the break outs) there is a one-minute default. This gives them a chance for closure before they are brought back to the main room.
4. Back in the main room: Mute everyone. Ask for a few shares: How was this for you and your group? Anyone want to share something that really stood out for them before we close?

For more information and hosting resources, visit conversationcafe.org

For many more dialogue tools and resources, visit ncdd.org