

RESOURCE GUIDE

Courageous Dialogues: Navigating Polarization



PHOTO BY JAMIE STREET, UNSPLASH

ABOUT COURAGEOUS DIALOGUES

THE PROJECT

[Courageous Dialogues: Moving Beyond Polarization](#) is a three-year (2021-24) applied research project being carried out by Selkirk College, Capilano University, and Vancouver Community College. The project is taking place in partnership with Decoda Literacy Solutions, the Columbia Basin Alliance for Literacy (CBAL), and the Continuing Education & Training Association of British Columbia (CETABC).

OUR GOALS

In the project, we want to understand polarization as it is happening in our communities and our work in the public and community education sectors. We also want to explore the wide range of interventions that may be adopted to reduce polarization and to smooth the way for constructive dialogue across divides.

WHAT IS POLARIZATION?

Polarization is a complex social dynamic that occurs when an issue that involves many different people, concerns and opinions is reduced to two opposing sides— “for or against” or “us vs them.” It goes well beyond ordinary disagreement. In fact, it can lead us to avoid debate or consideration of others’ ideas completely. When we believe that we alone hold the truth, we may see differences of opinion, values and beliefs as threatening and intolerable. These dynamics disrupt effective patterns of home and workplace communication. Instead of working with difference and making conflict constructive, we allow polarization to create painful divisions that are hard to overcome.

YEAR TWO RESOURCE GUIDE

This guide presents a selection of resources reviewed by our research team during Year Two of the project. What follows are brief descriptions of some of our favourite books, videos, websites, and podcasts to help understand, prevent, and repair polarizing dynamics. We hope you will find this guide helpful in navigating polarizing dynamics in your communities.

FORMAT



Website



Video



Toolkit



Article/
Blog



Audio



Guide



Book



Academic
Journal

We sorted resources into one of four overarching contexts or scales where they have been found to be most relevant and applicable, and we rated them for the level of time investment required. Please note that resources may be suitable for multiple contexts or scales.

SCALES & CONTEXTS



Individual

Strategies and skills for self-regulation and self-awareness.



Interpersonal

Strategies and skills for dialogue and small-scale interactions, as in conversations with family, friends, and colleagues.



Leadership

Strategies and skills for situations where we hold responsibility for the process and the outcome, as in teaching, facilitating, and managing an organization.



Public Square

Strategies and skills for influencing public understanding, opinions, or decisions, as in advocacy/activism, journalism, community dialogue and deliberation.

LEVELS OF INVESTMENT



Toe in the Water: Under 30 minutes

Quick resources that are great to explore if you are short on time.



Waist Deep: 30–60 minutes

Have a bit more time on your hands? These get a little more in-depth without being too overwhelming.



Deep Dive: Over 60 minutes

These may take more time to get through, either due to length or amount of information included. They are still well worth the investment!



INDIVIDUAL

Strategies and skills for self-regulation and self-awareness

How to See Past Your Own Perspective and Find Truth [🔗](#)



MICHAEL PATRICK LYNCH

How can we see beyond our information bubbles and tell what's real and what's fake? In this TED talk, Michael Patrick Lynch outlines three solutions for navigating "knowledge polarization" and acknowledging that "we live in a common reality." He calls for us to believe in truth, to dare to know, and to have some humility. While these three steps might be a little generalized, they are good starting points for moving beyond polarization.

Conflict Resilience Resources [🔗](#)



TRANSITION NETWORK

The Transition Network is a movement of American communities helping to reimagine and rebuild our world from polarized dynamics. They offer resources to help communities develop the skills needed for the task, such as conflict resilience. Conflict resilience involves making relationships strong before tensions arise. When tensions do arise, people can make choices that support each other's well-being. Conflict resilience is less about resolving a conflict after it happens, and more about creating a connective and collaborative group culture. The website includes numerous activities and exercises for skill development and practice - an opportunity to go waist-deep, and for a deep dive, try them all!



INDIVIDUAL

Strategies and skills for self-regulation and self-awareness

Bridging Differences Playbook



GREATER GOOD SCIENCE CENTRE

This handy, easy-to-obtain workbook supports the development of key skills needed to bring people back into conversation with and connection to each other. Divided into three sections (intrapersonal, interpersonal, and intergroup), it consists of 14 well-researched and field-tested activities. The first 20 pages are essential reading as the authors make the case for why this work matters. They describe what bridging is and what it is not and explain the benefits. The guiding principles included in this playbook are valuable. They provide a road map for this complex work and a process to assess progress.

I Never Thought of it That Way: How to Have Fearlessly Curious Conversations in Dangerously Divided Times



MÓNICA GUZMÁN

This is an easy-to-read, excellent book that makes understanding polarization and steps to overcome it accessible to a wide audience. While it takes time to read the full book, it is very much worth the effort! Guzmán has a talent for helping readers understand concepts by using both images and acronyms. For example, SOS is a call for help, and a sign of polarization when we Sort, Other, and Silo as a way of understanding the world. One way we can work to overcome polarization is to get curious and embrace INTOIT moments. INTOIT moments are when we start to bridge differences by understanding someone else's perspective – saying: "I Never Thought of It That Way." (Apologies to the "W").



INTERPERSONAL

Strategies and skills for dialogue and small-scale interactions

W. Kamau Bell's Thoughts on Awkward Relationships and Bridging Divides [🔗](#)



THE SCIENCE OF HAPPINESS

In this podcast episode, we learn about the shared identity practice. The practice aims to bridge divides between people by identifying what we have in common instead of our differences. This exercise can be quick or in-depth. Even a short reflection on its prompts can help us see others in a new light and foster a sense of connection. By focusing on the shared aspects of our humanity, we can move beyond divisions and develop empathy and understanding towards those we may have seen as members of an “out-group.” It is a practical method for promoting compassion and cooperation, and for breaking down barriers between people and groups.

Eight Keys to Bridging Our Differences [🔗](#)



GREATER GOOD SCIENCE CENTRE

This short blog post is a must-read that offers insights on how to foster understanding in polarizing times. It covers a range of fundamental capacities that apply to all contexts where divisive dynamics occur. These include active listening, empathy, finding common ground, respectful dialogue, and reframing differences as opportunities for growth. We are called to be open-minded, cultivate curiosity, and challenge our biases. Ultimately, this blog post emphasizes the power of compassion, kindness, and building connections to bridge divides and create a more inclusive and united world. One small shift or short bridge at a time!



INTERPERSONAL

Strategies and skills for dialogue and small-scale interactions

Don't Call People Out - Call Them In



LORETTA J. ROSS

This TED talk is delivered by Professor Loretta J. Ross, a radical black feminist who has been working for human rights for over four decades. In this presentation, Ross describes the difference between calling out and calling in, and also identifies the characteristics and limits of “call-out culture”. Calling out refers to the act of publicly shaming another person for their behavior. Call-out culture has been at the forefront of two recent social movements: #MeToo (against sexual abuse and sexual harassment) and global protests against police violence. As a result, employees called out their bosses, consumers called out corporations, students called out peers, and victims called out abusers. Conversely, calling in occurs privately and respectfully, rather like an act of love. Calling in involves three components: conversation, compassion, and context. It does not condone or ignore the harm, slight or damage caused by the first person’s actions or words but sees opportunities for growth and leverages the power of respectful, caring relationships to bring about change.

The Constructive Cycle of Conversation



ESSENTIAL PARTNERS

During a conversation we make choices that invite different types of responses. Constructive communication cycles create and hold space for diversity of thought. This guide offers immediately actionable advice for initiating and maintaining a constructive communication cycle. The four steps of the cycle are described with encouragement to practice and repeat the cycle. Our communications can be enhanced by even integrating one step of the cycle. Imagine how effective our conversations can be by using all four!



INTERPERSONAL

Strategies and skills for dialogue and small-scale interactions

Collaborating with the Enemy: How to Work with People You Don't Agree with or Like or Trust



ADAM KAHANE

There are times in our lives that we find ourselves needing to collaborate with people we don't trust or agree with. Through his many years of bringing disparate groups together, Kahane has learned that our general understanding of collaboration – that it requires explicit agreements, harmony, and consensus – is not the answer. Instead, he suggests that we need to consider a new way of engaging – one that embraces differences, experimentation, and the opportunity for co-creation. The key point of the book is that genuine coexistence can occur when we let go of the need for control, welcome uncertainty, and are open and receptive to others.

High Conflict: Why We Get Trapped and How We Get Out



AMANDA RIPLEY

This book explains and illustrates the polarizing nature of high conflict through the stories of four key and real characters, and those around them. It reads like a novel, as opposed to a non-fiction book, about a social phenomenon that is threatening our democracy. Through the lived experiences of the players, we learn how high conflict develops and what it takes to move out of conflict. It includes an accessible glossary to help with definitions used in the book. It ends with three guides for recognizing high conflict in the world, another for recognizing it in yourself, and finally, for preventing high conflict in the first place.



LEADERSHIP

Strategies and skills for situations where we hold responsibility for the process and the outcome

Conversation Guide: Calling In & Calling Out [🔗](#)



LIVING ROOM CONVERSATIONS

This is a brief guide to holding a bridging conversation about the practices of calling in and calling out. (see TED talk by Loretta J Ross, p.6) It includes definitions of both terms, suggested conversation agreements, prompts for helping participants understand each other, a second set of prompts for exploring the topic, and prompts for reflecting on the conversation. This is ideal for small groups (four to seven people) who are willing to meet in person or virtually for about 90 minutes. It can be used by anyone who wants to host a meaningful structured conversation on the topic of calling in versus calling out.

Hard to Say, Hard to Hear, Heart to Heart: Inviting and Harnessing Strong Emotions in Dialogue for Deliberation [🔗](#)



ROBERT STAINS & JOHN SAROUF

Dialogue is about creating or repairing relationships. It can have value alone or as a precursor to decision-making. This easy-to-read article explores how strong emotions can be encouraged and harnessed through careful planning and facilitation so participants in dialogue can truly hear each other. The planning includes connecting meaningfully with participants, involving them in creating effective communication agreements, and in predicting and preparing for challenges. It also involves facilitating in connected, compassionate, and clear ways. The result is the sharing of stories that bring forth powerful emotions, building resonance among those who share and those who witness them and prompting curiosity and caring.



LEADERSHIP

Strategies and skills for situations where we hold responsibility for the process and the outcome

Story Circles: Deep Listening & Bridge Building on Issues That Matter [🔗](#)



CAPITAL PUBLIC RADIO

Story Circles bring diverse individuals together in an intimate setting to talk about an important issue, hear each other, and envision a way forward. Stories – personal memories, reflections, or moments in time – are different from lectures, arguments, debates, opinions, or statistics. This guide uses the example of housing and homelessness. It offers guidelines for hosting a story circle, suggested planning steps, and advice for crafting prompts and facilitating the sharing of stories. Produced by a California radio station to promote engaged journalism, it will help anyone who wants to cultivate listening and bridge-building within a divided neighbourhood or community.

The Little Book of Dialogue for Difficult Subjects: A Practical, Hands-On Guide [🔗](#)



LISA SCHIRCH & DAVID CAMPT

This book is a compact guide that helps transform how we engage on polarized issues. It focuses on the power of well-facilitated dialogue, as opposed to debate. It is packed with practical strategies and insightful tips for how to organize, design, and facilitate dialogues, including how to move from dialogue to action. This provides readers with the essential tools to foster productive conversations on the most challenging topics. This book champions empathy, active listening, and open-mindedness as key ingredients for bridging divides.



LEADERSHIP

Strategies and skills for situations where we hold responsibility for the process and the outcome

The Little Book of Cool Tools for Hot Topics: Group Tools to Facilitate Meetings When Things Are Hot



RON KRAYBILL & EVELYN WRIGHT

This small guidebook provides practical tools for facilitating conversations on contentious topics. The book's practical tools and strategies help people learn to really hear each other and focus on the issues of importance rather than engaging in conflicts between perspectives. Some tools included are circle processes, interviews, appreciative inquiry, polarity management, and world café. The book's simplicity and effectiveness make it a must-read for those seeking to engage in productive conversations amid heated debates.

When the Center Does Not Hold: Leading in an Age of Polarization



DAVID BRUBAKER, EVERETT BRUBAKER, CAROLYN YODER, & TERESA HAASE

This small book would make a great textbook for a course on polarization. While it focuses on American experiences of polarization, it includes other conflicts to explain what polarization is, what the literature tells us about it so far, and what drives it (spoiler alert – it's not entirely the fault of social media). This book also offers some ways to avoid these conflicts by being mindful of language, developing conflict resilience, and taking a trauma-informed approach when considering strategies. It is a hopeful and inspiring book on a complex topic.



PUBLIC SQUARE

Strategies and skills for influencing public understanding, opinions, or decisions

The Radical Act of Choosing Common Ground [🔗](#)



NISHA ANAND

Nisha Anand has bridged divides in the realms of criminal justice reform and peacebuilding. In an inspiring TEDx talk in 2020, she speaks of the power that can be generated when we are brave enough to reach across the aisle; large-scale change requires broad-based movements, after all. Anand says we need to love those people who might not love us back. Our goal should be to find our shared humanity, our ability to be there together with each other in shared space -physical and civic and political –to steward the commons: those resources we inherit and create together.

Complicating the Narratives [🔗](#)



AMANDA RIPLEY

Even with the best intentions, journalists may intensify conflict. This article offers tips to avoid this by outlining ways to cover stories differently. This begins with understanding the “story underneath the story.” Ripley includes a wide range of techniques for turning a polarizing conflict into a useful mediation tool. Although Ripley writes for journalists specifically, her advice on how to complicate narratives, listen for underlying motivations, and inject agency and hope into conversations is applicable to everyday conversations. Journalists are not the only actors who contribute to conflict and oversimplifying issues. All of us could learn to listen better and actively cultivate our shared desire to understand and be understood on a deeper level. This article is an excellent starting point for how to do that.



PUBLIC SQUARE

Strategies and skills for influencing public understanding, opinions, or decisions

Cultivating Courageous Communities Through the Practice and Power of Dialogue [🔗](#)



ROBERT STAINS

This article describes in depth the Reflective Structured Dialogue (RSD) method and its seven core practices: collaboration; participant preparation and reflection; creating agreements; slowing the process down; structured exchanges; inquiry for fresh stories; and inviting curiosity. Together, these invite the sharing of our genuine selves. Noting that 80% of the work is done before the dialogue itself, The author provides specific, wise, and practical instructions for preparing and facilitating the dialogue. This is an excellent resource for leaders who want to help people have courageous conversations that build connection and conflict resilience.

I'm Right and You're an Idiot: The Toxic State of Public Discourse and How to Clean it Up [🔗](#)



JAMES HOGGAN

This book summarizes interviews by the author with public figures (psychologists, philosophers, feminists, researchers, and more) to examine the breakdown of public discourse. Hoggan offers hope by presenting possible solutions for cleaning up the public square. He helps us understand the phenomenon of polarization and where it comes from by naming and describing a variety of cognitive/psychological drivers (hint: we are a part of the dynamic). Hoggan presents pragmatic strategies for cultivating personal awareness and growth, enhancing pluralism, framing narratives, and holding effective conversations and dialogue. This is a satisfying read with lots of 'aha!' moments.



PUBLIC SQUARE

Strategies and skills for influencing public understanding, opinions, or decisions

The Persuaders: At the Front Lines of the Fight for Hearts, Minds, and Democracy



ANAND GIRIDHARADAS

Challenging the notion that depolarization work requires neutrality, Giridharadas argues that persuasion is a necessary requirement for any democratic society. Giridharadas explains how a polarized society is one that completely dismisses opposing points of view, resulting in little to no meaningful engagement between opposing parties. The lost art of persuasion, he argues, is a form of engagement that can truly change minds so that the best decisions can emerge. By looking at case studies involving activists, politicians, and educators, Giridharadas focuses on building trust, bridging divisions, and changing minds. One big takeaway is the distinction between victims of disinformation and its perpetrators.

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