



## THE DEMOCRATIC CUP CONVERSATION TOOLKIT

### ***Mission***

The Democratic Cup is a slow activism project that uses handmade cups to encourage people to become engaged and effective citizens in our democracy. We encourage person-to-person civil conversations about social and political issues. As a country, we need conversations and connections to reinforce the dignity and inclusivity of all Americans, regardless of race, religion, gender, sexuality, culture, age, and socioeconomic background. The Democratic Cup believes that these cups will act as agents of social change by generating positive political discourse.

### ***Why do we need civil conversation?***

Why do we need civil conversation when our political leaders do not always act truthfully and with civility? We believe that every human being holds an innate dignity and that each of us deserves respect. At the most fundamental level, we believe that conversations have the power to connect and forge relationships and that functional objects, like the kind we are making, foster the success of this interaction. Being civil should not be taken as a superficial attempt at niceties, but as a genuine way to honor someone's full humanity through respect and understanding. We realize that the issues we are addressing bring out strong emotions- fear, anger, and love, among others. We hope that these can be channeled into conversations that are positive and constructive.

### ***Purpose of this Guide***

This guide aims to serve as a framework for people who hold both similar and differing opinions to understand more about each other. Our goal is not to change anyone's minds. Our goal is to create more empathy in a world that sorely needs it.

## FACILITATORS

When Lawrence Williams, now a teacher at the University of Colorado, was a doctoral student at Yale, he helped design an [experiment](#) that concluded that people who held something warm were more likely to perceive someone else as emotionally 'warm', and were ultimately more likely to act in a friendly, generous manner. While riding an elevator with each of the volunteers, Williams' colleague asked them to hold her cup of hot or cold coffee. Half the volunteers held hot coffee and the other half held iced coffee. They then filled out questionnaires, wherein it was determined that "Participants who held the hot coffee cup rated this Person A as more generous, more social, happier, better natured" than participants who held the iced coffee.

With this in mind, consider bringing warm drinks--and food--to your next discussion!

### ***I. Before the discussion***

- ❖ Set the agenda
  - Is there a specific goal? Is it a problem-solving session? Is it a brainstorming session?
  - Don't assume participants all have the same expectations when the group first convenes
  - Determine number of participants (we recommend 4-10)
  - Determine the length of the discussion (we recommend 1.5-2 hrs)
  - Come up with 5-10 discussion questions depending on the length of the discussion
  - Partnered discussions: have reference questions for participants to discuss
- ❖ Send participants information practical info including location, time, snacks
- ❖ Ask participants to bring pen and paper
- ❖ Give participants a summary of the topic and goals and ask them to think beforehand about their ideas and thoughts

### ***II. Opening reflection***

- ❖ Take some time to have participants write down:
  - What they hope to take away from the discussion
  - Any concerns they have regarding the discussion
  - Questions to ask about the project

### ***III. Introductions***

- ❖ If the group is large, split up into pairs and then have each person introduce 3 things about their partner to the whole group (name, where they are based, etc.)
- ❖ Be sure to ask about [preferred pronouns](#)
- ❖ Introduce the local issue and ask what people thought about the resources and if they found more resources that might be helpful

#### **IV. Review posted guidelines and ask participants to agree or if they have anything to add**

##### Recommended Guidelines

- ❖ Treat others with respect, through verbal and non-verbal communication
- ❖ Listen actively to understand and learn without judgment
- ❖ Be curious and open-minded about others' ideas
- ❖ Give equal opportunity for everybody to participate
- ❖ Encourage alternate views
- ❖ Speak only for oneself and expect others to do the same
- ❖ Explore disagreement and conflicting ideas
- ❖ Be mindful of your own biases
- ❖ Allow for silence
- ❖ Be generous with patience, encouragement, and humility

#### **V. Common situations during a discussion**

- ❖ Encouraging equal participation
  - *Give everybody equal opportunity to speak*; don't allow the dominant or more verbal participants to take over the conversation
  - Write comments on a whiteboard
  - Ask follow-up questions
  - Paraphrase comments between speakers
  - Re-visit past contributions and incorporate them into the discussions.
  - Encourage others to build on someone's comment
  - Give people time to think and process
- ❖ Disagreements
  - Set aside judgements
  - Disagreement makes people think more deeply about their long held beliefs
  - Use humor when appropriate
  - *Listen for the areas of common ground* (what's agreed) and of unresolved differences (what's not yet agreed)
  - Listen to subtle differences in what's being said. There are shades of agreement.
  - List both sides of the argument on the board
  - Prevent participants from interrupting each other or speaking simultaneously



- *Ask about how personal history has informed opinions*, i.e. as The Democratic Cup, we do not want to validate white supremacy or uphold it as a moral equivalent
- Use your judgment when you need to move on to the next thing but do so tactfully so as not to invalidate the participants' opinions. Return to the guiding questions.
  
- ❖ Emotionally upset or angry participant
  - Ask what they're feeling
  - Don't try to combat their emotions with logic or facts
  - Allow them time to process and experience their emotions
  - Let them talk it out if they want to; listen to understand where they are coming from
  - Be mindful of your own response to their emotions; don't fuel the fire with defensiveness, anger, or by shutting down
  - Check in with them after the discussion
  
- ❖ The participant who talks too much
  - Redirect the discussion to another person or another topic
  - Reframe their comments, making them viable additions to the discussion
  - Break down the group into still smaller task groups
  - Don't be afraid to call the person out, "X, we've heard from you a lot. Let's be sure to share the air".
  
- ❖ The participant who doesn't talk
  - Provide opportunities for smaller group discussions or pair-share discussions
  - Ask opinion questions occasionally (reduces participants' fear of answering incorrectly)
  - Ask for written feedback from the group for some question
  - *Be sure to hold time for people to think and process.* Ask no one to speak for one minute.
  
- ❖ Conversation gets off track
  - Return to goals set at the beginning if conversation diverges too much
  - There comes a point in most discussions when someone needs to pull everything together and move on to the next stage of the process, or to the next agenda item

## **VI. Final reflection**

At the end of the discussion, allow some time for participants to revisit the opening reflection.



- ❖ What did you learn? Did any of your ideas change?
- ❖ Did your concerns arise? Were they solved?
- ❖ Were your questions answered?
- ❖ Did new questions and ideas come up?
- ❖ What you need to follow up on?

Revisit the discussion guidelines and reflect on how they were--or weren't--met. How do you think the next discussion could improve?

***VII. After the discussion***

- ❖ Email or mail participants thank you note post-conversation
- ❖ Email venue thank you

## PARTICIPANTS

- ❖ Bring something to take notes on and jot down ideas and questions as they arise
- ❖ Think about these questions beforehand:
  - What do you want to be mindful of during the discussion?
  - What background are you coming from when you are approaching the topic of the conversation?
  - What biases do you hold?

### ***Creating An Inclusive Environment***

- ❖ A safe and open environment for a discussion allows all members to:
  - Have a chance to speak
  - Hear others' ideas stated openly
  - Test out ideas
  - Receive and respond to respectful, constructive feedback
  - Put forward and discuss many viewpoints
  - Participate equally
  - Respectfully disagree
- ❖ Developing self-awareness. Ask yourself:
  - What do I bring to the group?
  - What surprises or challenges me?
  - How do I normally participate in group discussions (speaking a lot, observing)?
- ❖ Developing awareness for cultural, social, etc. differences. This takes practice! Try to:
  - *Share personal experiences* rather than make general statements about groups
  - Be conscious of using idioms that an English language learner may not know
  - *Encourage alternate views* or counter-arguments by emphasizing the value of a diversity of perspectives
  - [Be aware of your privilege](#)
  - *Be unafraid to admit your own ignorance* or confusion if you don't know something. Chances are there are others who are in the same boat. Use the opportunity to learn!
  - *Assume that no one holds particular opinions because of their culture, background, race, personal style, etc.* Find out what someone thinks by asking, or by listening when they speak.
  - Assume that no one from a particular culture, race, or background is speaking for everyone else from that situation
  - Keep yourself and others from imposing views on the entire group



- ❖ Being civil
  - Use respectful language, tone, and non-verbal communication
  - Don't call people names or insult their ideas
  - *Be humble.* Humility “is not about debasing oneself, but about approaching everything and everyone with a readiness to be surprised and delighted.”<sup>1</sup>
  - Assume best intentions
  - *Listen actively* and attentively by giving full attention to the speaker
  - Hear what the speaker is trying to say, not what you want to hear
  - Don't allow your own biases or values to detract from the speaker's message
  - *Remain curious* about what the other person is saying, even if you disagree
  - Ask for clarification if someone's intent is unclear
  - Focus conflict on ideas, rather than people
  - *Write down thoughts* that may pop up while the other person is speaking, but do not interrupt.
  - Try not to be defensive if someone points out your biases
  - Stay flexible and keep an open mind
  
- ❖ How to disagree with respect:
  - *Listen for the areas of common ground* (what's agreed) and of unresolved differences (what's not yet agreed)
  - Listen to subtle differences in what's being said. There are shades of agreement.
  - If the other person is becoming upset, don't try to combat their emotions with logic or facts
  - Give them time to gather their thoughts and share their opinions without being interrupted
  - *Listen to understand* where they are coming from
  - *Be mindful of your own response* to their emotions; don't fuel the fire with defensiveness, anger, or by shutting down
  - Know when to agree to disagree

### ***How to Use your Democratic Cup***

- ❖ Encourage conversation within your own kitchen with family and friends
- ❖ Bring your cup to work for a conversation
- ❖ Bring your cup to your next Town Hall meeting
- ❖ Consider leading a discussion about this issue or another issue you feel strongly about or that is relevant to your local or online community
- ❖ Share pictures of it on social media ([Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#)) and tag it using #thedemocraticcup



## FURTHER RESOURCES

[Ask Big Questions](#)

[Brown University Teaching & Learning Resources](#)

[<sup>1</sup>Civil Conversations Project](#)

[Community Toolbox](#)

[National Institute for Civil Discourse](#)

[Seeds for Change](#)