

BRIEFING NOTE

Grounding the Methodology: Rights and Responsibilities in Conversation with guidance for participants

Dyer's earlier work available at gdyer.org.uk with his free downloadable book *Safeguarding our future: Systems thinking framework for action post Covid-19* (pp 89-121), along with previous work on Rights and Responsibilities in Conversation provides the ethical spine of this programme. While the focus of the book methodology is on adult groups, the facilitator guidance notes are adaptable for use for of a school-based programme. These frames dialogue not simply as a skill, but as a shared social contract. This balances freedom of expression with responsibility to listen, reflect, and respond with care and stresses the importance of meeting shared commitments.

Conversation as Ethical Practice Conversation is treated as a civic act. Students learn that speaking up is not just a right — it's a responsibility that carries implications for others. The methodology encourages learners to:

- Recognise the impact of their words
- Consider the perspectives of others
- Engage in conversations that build rather than break
- Draw on collective intelligence for creativity to enhance solution finding

Structured Freedom The programme promotes structured formats (e.g. circle dialogue, placemat protocols, values mapping) to ensure that every voice is heard and respected. These formats model democratic participation and help students internalise the principles of inclusive dialogue.

Emotional and Cognitive Safety By embedding rights and responsibilities into the design of each activity, the methodology creates a psychologically safe space for learners to explore difficult topics. This includes:

- Clear ground rules for participation
- Facilitator prompts that encourage empathy and curiosity
- Reflection cycles that allow students to process and reframe

Reflecting Vision and Understanding This approach isn't just about teaching students how to talk — it's about cultivating the capacity to listen, to reflect, and to co-create meaning.

By embedding structured dialogue, emotional literacy, and collaborative inquiry, the methodology reflects both Vision and Understanding.

Design Conversation Rules In a Western democracy scenario, most participants in design conversation practice would accept the following set of rules as a reasonable start:

- Display tolerance, patience, and consideration to others.
- Honour and respect each other.
- Listen to others, try to understand the point of view being expressed, reflect, respond.
- Do not dominate.
- Do not offend.

- Avoid losing control of one's feelings.
- View all ideas as contributions to the group for consideration, accepting that not all ideas are used.
- Allow equal opportunity to participate.

In other cultures, e.g. Far East, such a set might not be appropriate. Strict protocols on contributions to discussion apply, and the last in the list may not be agreed. The rules to be followed by any group, can be resolved by them at the first or early meeting. The first seven rules above would apply for ethical design conversations within an open culture.

Design Conversation as a process As well as referring to a style of dialogue, the two-word phrase design **conversation** is also used to describe the methodology itself. If agreements are reached, then it is important to review whether progress and process in action are being met in terms of behaviours, tasks and deadlines. The cycle of agreement to new standards with documentation (e.g. Team Charter), which states agreeing to work to commitments, reviewing outcome, possible change of direction, should feature in any project - including joint projects for students. The reviews require allocations of time (homework equivalent?)-outside of formal teacher facilitation. A good use for social media activity.

Group size for student joint projects is an important consideration. The ideal size is 6-8 - over that number communication lines gets increasingly difficult. If working on a common issue e.g., a Student Charter for a larger group (Class, Year Group, School Group). then a system of representatives would need to apply to cascade drafts upwards.

Difference to Debate Design conversation is likely to be a challenge for most of us. This is particularly true of teenagers who struggle to find their independence, whereas co-design means recognition of our **interdependence** with others. Educational and social culture is founded in debate – essentially aiming at “I win, and you lose”. An outcome which means that some losers can remain disaffected and may not collaborate in the winners’ plans. Losers’ creative intelligence is lost to the group.

Design conversation dialogue is based on finding a common set of values within a group as a basis for compromise and accommodations which all can accept as a vision for initially going forward. This means the group’s potential collective intelligence is maximised and available to solve problems. The challenge is to sustain conversation by conducting dialogue without infringing agreements as circumstances change.

Debate and Design Conversation These dialogue styles are complementary. One important advantage of debate is that its open challenge reduces the chance of ‘groupthink’. Conversation must deal with ‘groupthink’. but does it with a different style and tone. If anyone in a conversation thinks they might be coming to a decision too early, the technique is to pose the question e.g. “Does anyone think like me that we are coming to a conclusion on what to do next too soon?”, or “What are we missing, think everybody?”. In short, conversation provides a more collaborative, ethical and respectful way to make decisions on “what to do”. Thereafter debate can complement conversation on “how to proceed” by exploiting its rationality but by avoiding its current political tendency and in social practice to be disrespectful and aggressive.

Leadership in Design Conversation There are other options in design conversations which don’t normally occur in standard decision-making discussions. Designing a future which no-one has yet experienced means that the normal leader ‘daddy figure’ (in an adult group) does not necessarily have all the best suggestions. This applies particularly if an issue is outside of the

normal leader's experience (e.g. to the nominated Team Leader appointed to lead on this proposed project). Design conversation with adult groups views sharing of leadership as a distinct possibility if someone with expertise is available which links to a problem at hand. Another individual may offer or be invited and accept leadership temporarily, if all agree. Switching of roles can be a useful development process. Whether such a process should apply to KS5 projects, say for adaptation from KS4 will be up to the project team

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMPOSITION OF THE PROPOSAL PROJECT TEAM

It is recommended that:

- the composition of the project team should follow the ethic of system design and represent the diversity of school population they are designing for.
- the project team should develop their own documents reflecting their values, vision and statement of commitment to the project
- the opportunity is taken to explore more sophisticated documentation to express their values, other than a Team Charter (analogous to the Student Charter proposed for KS4)
- the Team consider using the methodology outlined in *Safeguarding our future: Systems thinking framework for action post Covid-19* (pp 89-121)