



# COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS

## FACILITATION PROCESS

### DEFINING “COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS”

Often, we can feel the current of energy pass through every body in the room when someone in it makes a claim that endorses or challenges an inequity. In every mind, one voice says, “Run!” Another says, “Breathe. Engage.” As appealing as the first voice may sound in the moment, we know that, unless we take pains to ensure otherwise, our classroom and organizational cultures can reproduce and thereby sustain current inequities in our society.

In a courageous conversation, participants with diverse identities collaboratively explore the inequities which privilege some of them while oppressing others. Thus, every participant feels a vested interest in the matter – an interest in preserving or changing the status quo. Examining and altering the biases and bases of our selfhood and group identities in light of new knowledge requires great courage, hence the term “Courageous Conversations!”

In his article “The Ethical Space of Engagement,” Indigenous scholar, Willy Ermine, explains that when two people, groups, or cultures meet, there is a space between them: “[A] schismatic ambience is created between peoples and cultures, and in particular whenever and wherever the physical and philosophical encounter of Indigenous and Western worlds take place” (195).

Typically, one of two things can happen in this space: a. one person or group assumes superiority and dominates the other(s), forcing the other(s) to suppress, defend, or yield their ground, their truth; or, b. both regard their own knowledge with humility and the others’ with genuine respect and curiosity. In this “ethical space”, the “deeper thoughts, interests, and assumptions” of each can surface, newly available for co-examination and (re)consideration.

Courageous conversations provide a space and means to explore together how power is allocated, to empathize with diverse peoples’ experiences and perspectives, and to determine how use our own powers, individually and collectively, to respond compassionately to the suffering of marginalized others and to effectively challenge the root causes of inequities.

Generally speaking,

In academic contexts, there are 3 sources of courageous conversations:

1. Course Curricula
2. Contexts of Learning, including the class learning culture and the institution within which the learning takes place
3. Current Events & Issues, from local to international

Courageous Conversations have two primary purposes:

1. to support each individual to make a shift from egocentrism to fairmindedness;
2. to support groups to explore, evaluate, affirm and/or alter their own ethical norms.

## CONTEXT AND RATIONALE FOR COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS

There is remarkable diversity in every group. Each person's identity lives at the intersection of various factors, each of which, depending on context, can be a source of unearned advantage or disadvantage (McIntosh): age, language, race, nationality, gender identity, physical ability, social class -- to name a few. Furthermore, in Canada, each Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadian has rights and responsibilities within the treaty relationship and is uniquely positioned to contribute to and/or benefit from the actualization of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action.

According to the 'myth of meritocracy', in Canadian democracy, all citizens, regardless of race, class, gender, ability, and culture have equal opportunities to survive and thrive; success depends on individual effort and achievement.

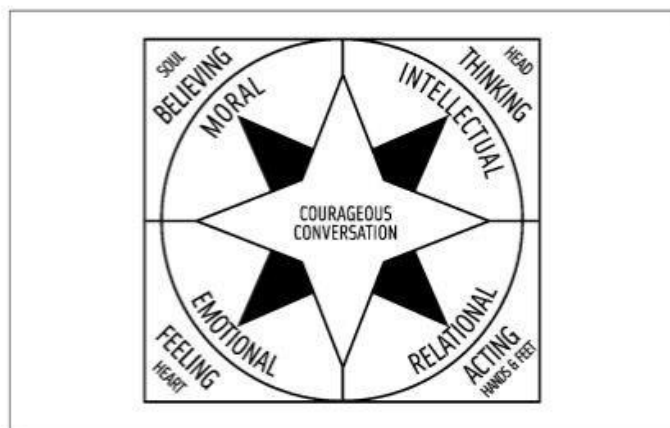
This belief ignores our shared colonial history which has systematically privileged some and marginalized others based on these socially and historically constructed, intersecting facets of their identities. Regardless of how hard they work, some people experience unearned advantages, while others face unearned disadvantages. These inequities are systemic, sustained through the policies and practices of dominant institutions and through dominant discourses which organize citizens' thought and interaction.

Courageous conversations are a necessary and potent means by which participants, individually and collectively, discover, problematize, and challenge inequities which pervade and arise within their shared contexts. As they engage in well-facilitated courageous conversations, people incrementally develop capacities for and commitments to cultural humility and intergroup accountability.

## WHERE THE COURAGE COMES IN

The image below, taken from Glenn Singleton's book, *Courageous Conversations About Race*, identifies the parts of a human being which courageous conversations engage and affect: our beliefs, thoughts, emotions, and relationships -- the sacred grounds of identity.

Figure 2.1 The Courageous Conversation Compass



Ermine affirms, “Each of us knows our own boundaries, the contours of our sacred places that we claim for ourselves as autonomous actors in the universe” (195). Until we learn otherwise, these boundaries will appear natural and/or earned, and we will defend them vigorously when threatened.

One of the ways we can learn otherwise is by entering into the “ethical space” of courageous conversations. Here, we are supported to do something at once alluring and dreadful, “to step out of our allegiances, to detach from the cages of our mental worlds and assume a position where human-to-human dialogue can occur” (Ermine, 202).

These conversations can be fascinating, allowing me to see beyond my limited fields of vision; they can also be threatening, as I may discover that I’m not who I think I am. In particular, treating an inequity as a subject of collective inquiry will challenge me to:

1. make my own assumptions and thinking visible and vulnerable to (my own and others’) scrutiny;
2. expose myself to people, points of view, and ideas I may find objectionable and/or threatening;
3. shift my thinking in response to new knowledge, principles, and relationships;
4. form commitments to act, commitments which require personal change, interpersonal tensions, and organizational leadership.

Each person will experience a different combination of burdens and gifts in a courageous conversation. While participating in the reasoning may initially feel threatening as one discovers one’s unearned privilege, marginalized students may experience a heightened sense of cultural safety when they discover (and the group affirms) that their disadvantage is, in fact, unearned. The presence of both privileged and marginalized identities in the process is critical for the creation of the ethical space in which truth and reconciliation can occur.

**THE CHALLENGE:** How can we, as educators and leaders, engage with critical and controversial issues, both in the moment and in premeditated ways, to optimize student and organizational learning and growth while minimizing harms?



## FACILITATING COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS

Courageous conversations about inequities can take many forms, depending on context, focus, purpose, participants, and culture.

There tend to be 4 facilitator stances toward Courageous Conversations:

**Stance 1:** Avoidant; reactive, unprepared

“I hope nothing triggers one and, if one arises, I don’t know what I’ll do.”

**Stance 2:** Avoidant, reactive, minimizing survival strategy

“I hope nothing triggers one, but I have a way of acknowledging and responding to it if it does.”

**Stance 3:** Open, reactive, “wing it” response

“I welcome these triggers, and will open up discussion when they occur.”

**Stance 4:** Open, proactive, intentional strategies

“These conversations are necessary; I plan for them and use strategies designed to engage all participants equitably and constructively.”

### WHY STANCE 4 WINS!

As many facilitators have learned, avoiding or minimizing a controversial issue weakens the trust and engagement of the group. Moreover, simply inviting participants to “discuss” can be problematic. In the ‘discussion’ that follows such an invitation, participants may give free reign to unexamined habits of thought and interaction that reinforce existing thinking and power dynamics in a group rather than interrupting or transcending them.

### WITHOUT A PLAN, HERE’S WHAT TENDS TO HAPPEN:

1. Only a few people speak.
2. Speakers and their ideas polarize quickly, sharply.
3. Listeners feel anxious.
4. Relationships are at risk.
5. When it’s done, it’s unlikely that anyone’s thinking has shifted significantly.

After an experience like this, participants may conclude that these problems and conversations about them are unavoidably divisive.



**WITH A PLAN, THESE TENDENCIES CAN BE REVERSED.** The community of participants can have an experience in which:

1. Everyone has a voice (often multiple times).
2. The range of ideas and perspectives is broad and deep.
3. Participants feel safe (not to be confused with comfortable!)
4. Relationships strengthen.
5. When it's done, it's likely that many people's thinking has shifted significantly.

Thankfully, there's no need to "just wing it" and "hope for the best." The Courageous Conversation facilitation process described below is designed to equitably engage all members of a diverse group, including the facilitator, in a process of reflection and co-construction of meaning which meets the criteria in the second list above.

## **FACILITATION PROCESS**

### **PREPARING FOR A COURAGEOUS CONVERSATION**

There are a few things to consider and do before engaging in the process below:

A. If the subject of a courageous conversation is one where a student or colleague may have experienced trauma, it's critical for the facilitator to provide choices which allow the participant to monitor themselves and adjust their participation as needed. This may include listening, journaling, speaking with a trusted peer in a quiet space nearby, or speaking with an elder if you and/or participants have invited one to be present.

B. (Co)construct shared norms and expectations before engaging in a courageous conversation. (Consider posting these for reference during the experience). The facilitator might consider sharing that participants should expect to experience some discomfort, and encourage them to regard, even welcome, discomfort as a sign that "an entry point into greater self-knowledge" is at hand (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 14).

C. Establish a shared minimum knowledge base of significant, accurate information about the topic. (Sometimes sharing a video or an anchor text can provide a common reference point for participants.)



## 4 STAGE PROCESS

The figure below represents the phases of a courageous conversation process (and the expansion in self-awareness and knowledge the process is designed to support in participants.) Note that the process both starts and ends with individual reflection. (In the explanation of the process that follows, the strategy, “Chalk Talk”, will illustrate each phase in the process.)

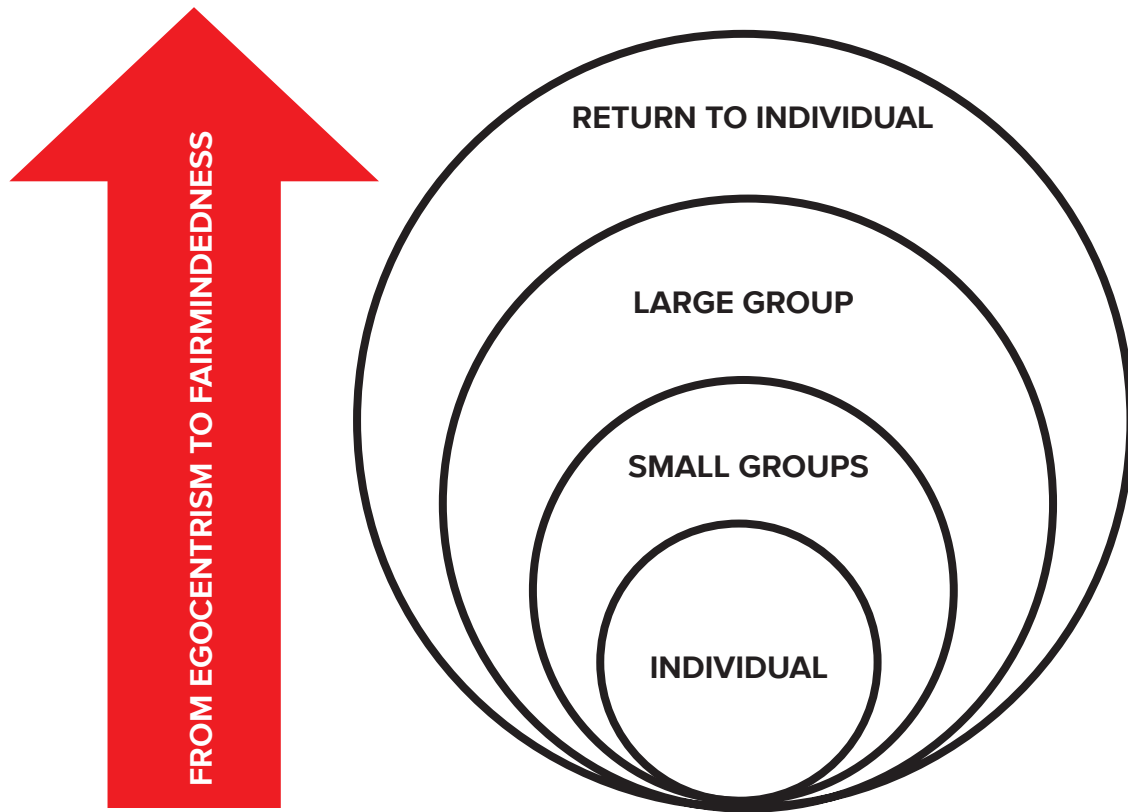


Figure 1, Van Hesteren, 2019

Terms in Red Arrow from Foundation for Critical Thinking, “Valuable Intellectual Traits” <https://www.criticalthinking.org/pages/valuable-intellectual-traits/528>

Note: See **Appendix** for specific strategies compatible with the 4 stages. Many of these strategies can be facilitated in ways which provide ways for participants to share their thinking with anonymity, allowing people to safely share their truths without fear of exposure, rebuke, or social sanction.



## PHASE 1: INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION



We start by honouring the individual, recognizing that each person is a unique knowledge keeper and knowledge shaper. In the business of our lives, rarely do we get the opportunity to make our own thinking visible to ourselves in response to a deeply meaningful question. So, in the first phase of a courageous conversation, the individual is at once the source and audience of their own thinking and feeling. Given that one of the ultimate ends of a courageous conversation is to afford opportunities for individuals to critically examine the assumptions at the heart of their own identities, it seems fitting to start by giving them a chance to shake hands with self!

### » **PROMPT**

The facilitator prompts individuals' reflection with a compelling essential question or thought-provoking statement. They can also co-construct the prompt with participants by sharing a text related to the equity issue at hand and generating a question or statement together. (Example of provocative statement: Respond to this statement, "When it comes to health care, one size fits all.")

### • **TIME TO REFLECT & MAKE THINKING VISIBLE**

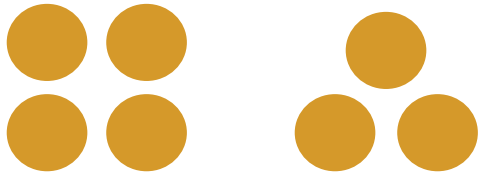
The facilitator then invites participants to make their thinking visible to themselves, and, if they choose, others. This could be done using words, images, and visual representations (on charts, sticky notes, white boards . . .)

Note: In the final phase of the process, the participant will "come full circle," returning to what they created at the beginning and reflecting on if and how their thinking has changed in the meantime.

**CHALK TALK PHASE 1** Participants find Essential Questions or Anchor texts in different locations around the room. They travel from one to the next, recording their own thinking and responses to others' thinking on sticky notes or chart paper.



## PHASE 2: SMALL GROUPS



Once the individual has discovered and represented their own thinking, support them to swiftly encounter others' ideas to see "what lies beyond [their] common-sense ideas about the world" (24, Sensoy).

- **FORM SMALL GROUPS**

The facilitator prompts participants to form small groups which will then either share the Phase 1 thinking they've recorded or examine others' Phase 1 thinking that has been represented on charts or gathered in some way (such as baskets in the picture below)

- **EXPLAIN THINKING ROUTINE & DISCURSIVE STRATEGY**

Share the strategy you've chosen for participants to explore, analyse, and synthesize the thinking participants have made visible thus far. Here they move from one perspective to many, and interact respectfully with the ideas of diverse peers.



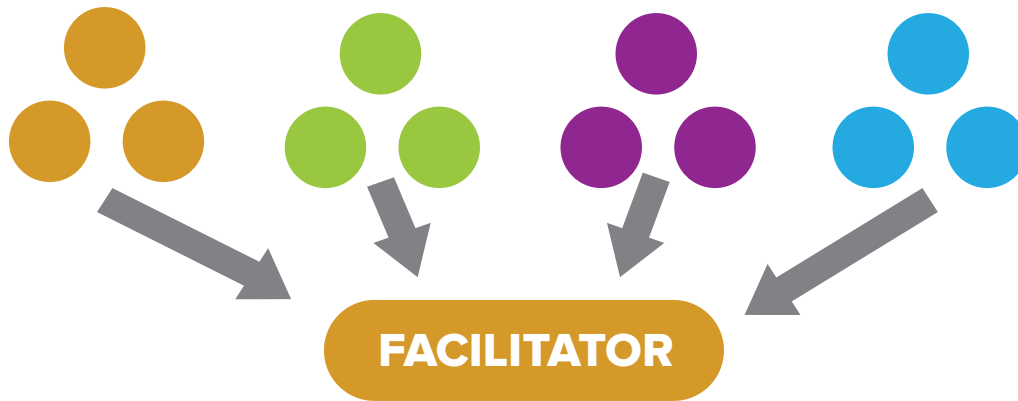
Photo used with permission

Small groups theming colleagues' ideas, recorded on sticky notes and gathered in baskets (from "Compass Points" Facilitation Strategy)

**CHALK TALK PHASE 2** Participants form small groups, one for each Phase 1 station / poster. The group sorts the ideas they find into categories, and prepare a summary to share with the large group.



### PHASE 3: LARGE GROUP



So far, each person has spoken and been heard by peers; in small groups, they have listened to many peers, and, together, synthesized multiple points of view. Each person's thinking has been expressed, considered, and integrated. Next, by sharing their syntheses and hearing those of other groups, the small groups can once again swiftly encounter thinking which exceeds their own. As the facilitator makes groups' thinking visible in a meaningful way, they can make connections, synthesize, and generate new questions at level of depth previously inaccessible to them.

- INVITE a spokesperson from each group to share the group's synthesis.
- MAKE THINKING VISIBLE in some way.
- POSE QUESTIONS to apply productive pressure on participants' thinking -- to find patterns, deepen reasoning, and generate newly significant questions.

**CHALK TALK PHASE 3** As representatives from small groups share their summaries, teacher and peers create a mind map establishing connections among the ideas. When they are done, they consider and record the new questions and implications arising from the group's thinking.

### PHASE 4: BACK TO THE INDIVIDUAL

Since Phase 1, each person's thinking has thus been shared, respectfully considered, connected to others' thinking, and integrated into emerging patterns, syntheses, and questions. Each participant has had voice and impact multiple times in the process.

- PROVIDE AN "I USED TO THINK, NOW I THINK" PROMPT

Now, invite participants to return to their initial thinking and reflect on the initial prompt once again: How has their initial thinking been confirmed, deepened, challenged, and/or transformed? What caused the shift(s)? What are the implications of taking this shift seriously? of choosing not to?

**CHALK TALK PHASE 4** Participants return to where they started and engage in the "I Used to Think . . . Now I Think" Thinking Routine." They can include these in their journals, do a "Think, Pair, Share" with a peer, and/or leave this with you as an exit slip to inform your next instructional steps or decisions.

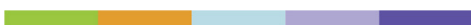
## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Privilege hides its sources and operations – the ways it is produced, distributed, inherited, denied, threatened, guarded, amplified, and contested. What can make this knowledge, deftly “enfolded in the subconscious”, show itself, offer itself up for examination so that privileged and marginalized alike can, perhaps for the first time, see its face, discover its work in their lives and others’, and to actively choose to accept or reject it. Until this moment, I may not know why my life is configured as it is. I may not know what I do, and why, and to what effects. I may be naïve to the alternatives available to me that might better align with my conscious values.

Courageous Conversations are a meeting place where we all have a seat at the table of truth and reconciliation, wherein we learn to sustain the discomforts and savor the expansions that happen when people conditioned to see themselves as different and divided conscientiously treat one another as equals. Here solidary relationships may develop, as participants’ spheres of concern expand to include the other, and they leverage the agency within their spheres of influence on one another’s behalf.

On a final note, while courageous conversations may seem dramatic, pivotal, isolated, and rare, they needn’t be. Ideally, they become part of the life of a community, each one enhancing “[our] capacity to know what harms or enhances the well-being of sentient creatures” (Ermine, 195) including those gathered and represented in our midst. Ermine affirms the need for ongoing opportunities to enter into “ethical space” together: “Initially, it will require a protracted effort to create a level playing field where notions of universality are replaced by concepts such as the equality of nations.”

**Written by Sherry Van Hesteren, May, 2019**



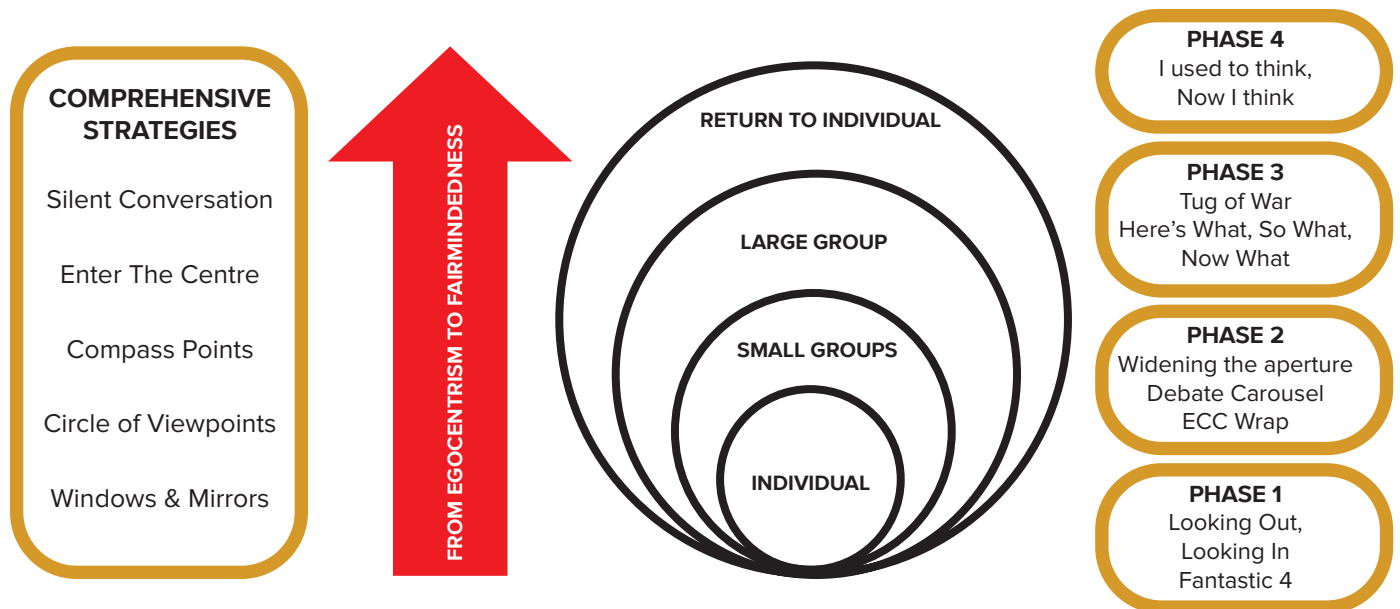
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## COURAGEOUS CONVERSATION FACILITATION STRATEGIES APPENDIX



### LEFT COLUMN:

Comprehensive Strategies can serve as a facilitation guide for all 4 Phases.

### RIGHT COLUMN:

Starter set of Phase specific strategies to choose from and use in sequence.

