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Convening Community Conversations | Programming

by [Jennifer A. Dixon](#)

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Libraries can be trusted places for users to share opinions, questions— even politics—with librarians facilitating the process and keeping it civil

IT CAN BE CHALLENGING to start a substantive conversation, not just small talk, among people of differing experiences and opinions, even—or especially—when they are neighbors. But libraries, as institutions used and trusted by a broad cross section of the population, are uniquely positioned to convene productive dialog that can help patrons abandon the “echo chamber” and start talking to one another.

Libraries nationwide are doing just that, training staff as facilitators, organizing thought-provoking discussions, and going out into the community as well as bringing users inside. Here, we share some examples of how and why to tackle the tough questions, as well as how to prepare for and avoid common fears and pitfalls.



CIVIL SERVICE Nashville PL's civic spaces provide settings for meaningful dialog (top): Members of Metro Nashville Police's Citizens Academy participate in a "Civil Rights and a Civil Society" workshop; the Civil Rights Room in action.

Top photo courtesy of Nashville PL; bottom photo ©2017 Bob Schatz

DEDICATED SPACES

Apart from structured programming, creating a space where everyone in the community feels comfortable can foster dialog and a feeling of connection to neighbors and local history. Many of the library staffers who spoke to *LJ* emphasized the value of having a safe space set aside where patrons know they can voice their opinions and converse honestly. Taking the community room

concept a step further, the Nashville Public Library (NPL), the [2017 LJ Library of the Year](#), has, through private funding, created a Civil Rights Room, which provides a space for exchanges about the role of Nashville in the civil rights movement. NPL's Civil Rights and a Civil Society Initiative, the Civil Rights Room's online storytelling platform, has a staff committed to outreach, public programs, and education.

Andrea Fanta, NPL special assistant for marketing and communications, credits the "authenticity" of the Civil Rights Room, with its collection of oral histories and historic documents, for its success in supporting conversations for more than 14 years. "The scholarly credibility of the room gives us a leg up in promoting the room and creates a tone that makes people...choose to come here," she says. A vital part of promoting the Civil Rights Room and its events is the grassroots outreach by Andrea Blackman, manager of the room and the initiative, and her team. Blackman highlights the value of having a space set aside, noting that visitors to the library are drawn in by the striking physical architecture. The space makes them more likely to "dig deeper" into questions about local history, she says.

For the staff at the Columbus Public Library, WI (a finalist for the [2017 LJ Best Small Library in America](#)), it helped to conduct outreach beyond the library walls, constructing a "root for Columbus" tree to which locals could tie "wishes" for their area. The library received about 450 wishes on its tree. This led to a series of conversations in the library, convening people around a desire to participate in their community through activities such as park cleanups or fundraising. According to Director Cindy Fesemyer, the value in placing the tree around town is that "when you're doing surveying of any kind, you want to talk to people who are not 'your people' already." In this way, the library is "really putting out the call to disparate people regardless of their affiliation, letting them cross borders for conversation and do something nice for their community," she says.

While many libraries have focused on community conversations that provide an opportunity to discuss current political or social issues, Fesemyer notes that this is not the only way. "Engaging your community is not inherently political," she explains. "I think the act of being that convener is very powerful, and citizens can then do what they want and take what they need" from these meetings. "This helps people get to know each other on a personal level and, I hope, creates more of a sense of empathy because we are all just humans."



TAKING ROOT Residents add wishes to the “root for Columbus” tree provided by the Columbus Public Library, WI, sparking community conversations.

Photos by Rod Mellot

CONVERSATIONS IN CONTEXT

Conversations held in the Nashville Civil Rights Room benefit from the connection to the past, as participants are able to compare contemporary issues to the history of their city, recognizing trends and transformative approaches. As Fanta puts it, “every community has a story” that can provide a powerful lens and guide discussions, making library events “not just another community conversation” of patrons commenting on the news. In this way, the library collection informs the dialog.

The facilitators at NPL take a flexible approach to conversations, using different models depending on the topic. They frequently employ the Socratic method, forming questions that get participants thinking and exchanging ideas. Facilitators frequently make use of the room’s focus on Nashville history, introducing old photographs as prompts for talk and writing exercises. They have also invited diverse speakers to the room, for instance, poets, authors, and those who participated in the Freedom Rides, to shape discussions. “There is no one model, one method,” says Blackman, recommending flexibility and open-mindedness.

The Brooklyn Public Library (BPL), a large system serving a widely varied population, has recently used its community book club meetings as an entry point for productive discourse among neighbors. For example, after the 2016 election, library staff noticed an uptick in checkouts for George Orwell’s dystopian classic *1984*. In light of a recognized need for people to gather and talk about issues on their minds, librarians launched a topical, systemwide book club, offering spaces for community members to talk about *1984* and other books of interest because of their connection to current events, such as the upcoming book club choice of Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*. The program just “exploded,” says chief librarian Lisa Rosenblum.

Rosenblum, a 2009 *LJ Mover & Shaker (M&S)*, advises keeping discussion groups of this kind small, to ensure participants have the opportunity to express their thoughts in a nonjudgmental atmosphere and truly “gather around a piece of literature.” Library staff–led trainings to prepare for these book clubs emphasize open-ended questions and promotion of critical thinking. Brooklyn libraries have also introduced events at which local professors present multisection classes on topics such as free speech, justice, and totalitarianism. According to Rosenblum, these courses are a reaction to the current political climate but also, on a higher level, about “great ideas.” Anchoring talks of contemporary issues through history or literature, she says, helps participants to “see that ideas that we are discussing now we were discussing 100 years ago.”

The Austin Public Library (APL), TX, has used film screenings as an entry point to meaningful conversation. According to Andrew Murphy, who oversees these screenings and dialogs, the program grew organically following a screening of the documentary *The Revisionaries*, about the Texas State Board of Education. “Everyone who attended was energized,” he says, and moving forward the library staff “wanted the program to highlight relevant controversial social topics. We recognized from the first that discussing social topics was a good way to bring the community together to discuss the issues.” On each occasion, the film provides a structure for a conversation about hot-button topics, guided by library staffers or local experts.



MOVING PICTURES At Texas’s Austin Public Library Terrazas branch, film screenings are an entry point for discourse on contemporary subjects.

Photo courtesy of Austin PL

FOCUSING ON THE LOCAL

For librarians at the Richland Library, SC, community unrest over current events like the trial of Dylann Roof, who murdered nine African American churchgoers in Charleston in 2016, provided the catalyst for the formation of a Social Awareness Task Force, devoted to supporting “Let’s Talk” events focused on challenging topics. Tony Tallent, chief program and innovation officer and

cochair of the task force and a 2008 *LJ M&S*, emphasizes the value of the group's early development of a mission statement, articulating goals and values to keep in mind. The task force aims "to actively build community by encouraging honest dialog, empathy, and courageous communication." This sets the tone for all conversations, he explains, and "helps us strengthen our mental and heart muscles to have these conversations that aren't always held in public places."

In addition, Tallent's cochair Tamara King, the library's community relations director, explains that facilitators provide "dialog guidelines at the beginning of each talk," telling participants to "respect each other and that it is okay to disagree." Guidelines include "Practice 'both/and' thinking. This invites us to see that more than one reality or perspective can be true at the same time, rather than either/or, right or wrong, good or bad. Focus on what is right, rather than who is right," and "learn to respond to others with honest, open questions instead of counsel, corrections, or attack."

King also notes the value of breaking up into small groups of five or six, as in "a big group of people, there's always the squeaky wheel, and other folks don't get to express how they feel as well. This helps us ensure that all voices are heard." Tallent tells *LJ* that their group discussions benefit from "the power of listening and allowing someone to speak their truth," even when it is uncomfortable. The Social Awareness Task Force has hosted approximately 350 people for talks on important topics, including social justice, women's rights, and race.

While many might anticipate that hosting hundreds of people and asking them to express themselves on potentially controversial subjects might lead to heated arguments, Richland has for the most part avoided conflict, something King attributes to their emphasis on dialog guidelines, the mission statement, and the value of patient listening. King can only think of one memorable moment when a participant in a discussion about race "got testy" and shut down the conversation but notes that others in the group continued to follow the guidelines and maintain a respectful tone.

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—CINDY FESEMYER, COLUMBUS PUBLIC LIBRARY, WI

For the APL film screenings, selection has focused on a range of controversial themes, Murphy explains, with a goal of highlighting issues relevant to Texas. The library has "screened documentaries on fracking, capital punishment, immigration, oil spills and pipeline access, abortion laws, and a few case studies of local

events such as the San Antonio Four" wrongful conviction case. Recent showings have coincided with important events in the news. For example, the library watched a movie on protecting the environment on the day the U.S. administration announced withdrawal from the

Paris Climate Agreement, and a documentary on abortion in the same week that a federal court issued a ruling rejecting Texas abortion restriction laws. “Some timing was serendipitous to the day, but we [had] recognized that some of the issues would be relevant this year,” Murphy says.

WELL-PREPARED FACILITATORS

Ensuring that conversations remain constructive and harmonious, even among patrons with diverging views, presents a challenge but is vital to the strength of these programs. This is where training of facilitators comes into play. At NPL, Blackman and several of the key staffers working with the initiative have gone through extensive training in institutional racism and unconscious bias and are also trained facilitators, with a background in the art of circle dialog and community organizing. Blackman also emphasizes the value of a background in education and in oral history. These program leaders have, in turn, trained support teams to guide conversations.

Ensuring that facilitators are equipped to manage community conversations also means looking out for their well-being. While Nashville’s Civil Rights Room and related programs have been a solid success in fostering community conversation, one challenge is “self-preservation” for staff, says Blackman, who may face burnout from having challenging discourse multiple days in a row. As the leader of the program, she makes an effort to stay in contact about the day-to-day stressors of the team and to schedule programs in a way that relieves some of the pressure and gives them breaks. She also notes that the library has provided program attendees with meals to ease tense conversations: “there’s power in food for bringing people who are different together.”

In the past, library staff at APL have also moderated conversations by asking open-ended questions that allow others to share their thoughts. According to Murphy, this approach can take some of the stress out of conversation groups. He explains, “This method also makes it easy for staff to avoid asserting personal opinions and present an air of neutrality.” Recently, APL has found success inviting outside speakers to present at screenings and conversations. “The guest speakers are generally experts [on] the topic. We are fortunate in Austin to have both a large university as well as many community-oriented organizations that make finding experts on the topic somewhat easy,” says Murphy.



“LET’S TALK” Current events prompt programs at Richland Library, SC (l.-r.): September’s Let’s Talk Race discussion drew a diverse group of over 70 people; to date, nearly 400 have participated in Richland’s Social Awareness programming.

Photos courtesy of Richland Library

While the goal of facilitators at these events is to support attendees, they are still in the position of needing to oversee and guide the conversations. Murphy emphasizes that it is “important for everyone to be included so no one is prevented from speaking or sharing their thoughts.” When one participant seems to be taking a conversation down an unproductive “rabbit hole,” he has had success with redirecting the conversation so that more than one person has the floor.

“Sometimes it may be as simple as saying, ‘Thanks for sharing,’ followed by a quick, ‘What do you think?’ to someone else in the audience,” he explains. “Or, simply calling on someone else with a raised hand without further comment works, too.”

Richland’s Tallent explains that the library’s Social Awareness Task Force facilitator training, is “really about creating an environment that is safe and secure. It’s about being a voice of authority but also allowing others to have their say. To be an encouraging voice but also to encourage the voice of others to come out. In truth, it’s a courage builder.” Before any event, the task force prepares questions that can guide group discussions. A meeting on “Let’s Talk Justice” that preceded a larger event with a talk by author Bryan Stevenson (*Just Mercy*), for example, included questions like, “Where have you seen the power of identity influence a justice issue? Who is someone who has made you feel hopeful or inspired about social justice work?” This kind of guidance supports program moderators as they help participants learn from a productive discussion.

Librarians handling these kinds of community conversations are continuously learning about how to create a space that patrons view as a safe and reliable venue for talking about the issues that matter to them. As BPL’s Rosenblum describes her role, “the best thing I can do is just not get in the way” of community ideas.

Group discussions can flourish when the patrons develop programs with local staff and feel empowered, coming up with ideas that matter to them. As Rosenblum says, “The most important thing we can do for our community is create a sense of belonging.”

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community engagement

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