

NYCMER Book Club | Best Practices: Creating Spaces for Productive Conversation

How to facilitate meetings that create brave space for folks to address difficult topics.

Planning before the program:

- Who is your audience?
 - Consider who your program is targeting. Is it a group of arts workers who are familiar with industry language? A group of art students? Art appreciators from the general public?? Knowing your audience well can help you tailor your program to best fit your audience's expectations.
- What topic most interests you and your audience?
 - What are the most pressing issues that concern your audience? What are the most important topics that need space to be discussed, that haven't been addressed before? In NYCMER book club, we purposely chose difficult topics on social justice. How can you create a space to confront topics that need attention?
- What about that topic would you like to explore/ focus on, and what guiding questions can you write to create a conversation around that focus?
 - Use open ended questions to guide conversation. Open ended questions are questions that allow folks to explore a topic with no right or wrong answers. Here are some examples from a recent Book Club Session about protests in museums: *What does accountability and action look like? What can museums learn from social change organizations? How can museums pursue a more equitable and collaborative work environment?*
- What additional resources, like readings or other media, can help develop your group conversation? If assigning readings or content beforehand, suggest easily digestible readings. Be aware of your target audience and make sure you are creating multiple ways for folks to engage, even if they don't have time to complete all of the reading.
 - if using articles, try limiting to just one that's a few pages long, and not overly academic/ has lots of jargon
 - suggest Instagram posts with visuals
 - suggest TEDtalks, or podcasts

During the program:

- Start with community guidelines. Research other groups' community guidelines; other ways of phrasing the guidelines, or other guidelines altogether can be more specific to your group's anticipated needs. Below are the guidelines that we used for our book club meetings (adapted from the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts' community guidelines):
 - → Be respectful of all participants' identities, beliefs, and opinions.
 - → Set aside all presumptions.

- → Share openly, even if you don't have the right words. Share from your own experiences, instead of others' experiences.
- → Use first person language.
- → One person speaking at a time. Respectful dialogue is taking turns speaking, and being a good listener.
- → Make space, take space. Leave space for others to participate.
- → Assume everyone has the best intentions, and practice forgiveness.
- → Be respectful of confidentiality. Please do not share other participants' stories outside of this program. This meeting is not being recorded. (Best to add this note, if you're able to not record the meeting! Letting folks know that you won't record the meeting lets them feel more comfortable to share.)
- Use a variety of ways to engage folks, change a way of engaging every 5-10 minutes, so you don't lose folks' attention
 - have small group discussions
 - use poll feature, other features that Zoom offers - break activities into fun chunks
 - share short audio/ video pieces (could be ~1-3 minutes long) during the meeting
- Suggest small groups for group sizes more than 9 people; for smaller groups, stick to large conversation/ popcorn style
Use your guiding questions here, to start off conversations
- If small groups, then regroup at the end to reflect
 - Ask the group some meaty reflection questions to wrap-up the meeting. For example: *what are some takeaways from our conversation today?*
- Ask everyone if okay to share contacts, to stay in touch

After the program:

- Create virtual space to keep in touch: send summary of meeting and shared resources to everyone, and share all contacts
- Suggest future meetings on topics of interest, and allow others to make suggestions