

INTERACTIVITY FOUNDATION

BIANNUAL REPORT

October 2021 - April 2022

Defending Democratic Principles



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Approved by IF Fellows & Intellectual Development Committee (IDC)

REAFFIRMING IF'S DEMOCRATIC MISSION

The mission of the Interactivity Foundation (IF) is to promote a robust citizen-centered democracy through supporting exploratory discussions about societal concerns. Our approach is to advance generous conversations aimed at avoiding a rush to solutions or prioritizing consensus. We focus on expanding public imagination by offering exploratory discussions that help to complicate rather than simplify our understanding of potential public policy options. We believe that the collaborative discussion skills and habits of mind needed to engage in these types of discussions are learned through intentional design, practice, and reflection. To that end, we enhance our civil dialogue work by also working to educate for more engaged and civically-oriented citizens.

The January 6th, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol and the more recent and unprovoked invasion of the democratic state of Ukraine have intensified our focus on how we can best conduct our civil dialogue work to fortify rather than weaken democracy. We've carried on this work with a new awareness of the fragility of democracy in the U.S. and abroad, and with a greater appreciation of IF's responsibility in doing what we can to strengthen it.

Specifically, we have carried out the work of clarifying IF's civil democracy mission in part through outreach and engagement with peer organizations and networks to see what we can learn from others in this field. This has included articulating areas of divergence between IF and other civil dialogue approaches.

A key point of divergence for IF in regard to other organizations is that we are far more focused on the danger presented by the rising autocratic, or anti-democratic, forces within the U.S. and globally. The majority of our peer organizations seem focused on "polarization" as the central problem of our time. If polarization is the problem, then the solution is to reduce the distance between the two sides. However, we believe the central problem is the rise of autocracy ("anti-democracy") and, thus, reducing the distance between the two sides, democracy and anti-democracy, is actually harmful.

How has this impacted our programming? It has made us increasingly mindful about how we frame our discussions to make clear that we are dedicated to strengthening and sustaining democracy. We try to avoid the sorts of binary framings that can heighten polarization, but at the same time we are clear about only entertaining perspectives or possibilities within the framework of a democratic society. By better defining our parameters, we will be better situated to improve how we advance civil discussions. It may also help to influence our field and connect with others who are engaging deliberative democracy with more urgency and care for democratic principles.

In this report, we highlight programmatic and conceptual developments in our community conversation and educational work. We also note our key partnerships. This report focuses on the current report period, October 2021 - January 2022.

COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

The Community Conversation team launched **four distinct discussion series** with a total of **16 unique discussion events** during this reporting period. As always, community conversations are facilitated in a small group setting which means that each event typically requires multiple facilitators in break-out rooms.

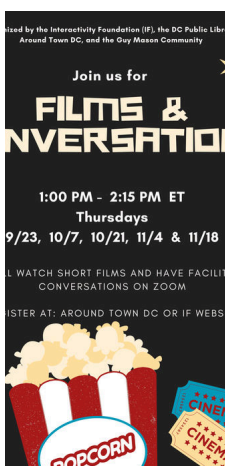
Key insights:

- Assessing and consolidating what we've learned from 2 years of conducting community conversations online, we've developed a robust list of best practices for facilitating exploratory discussions online.
- Community conversations are differentiated from our educational efforts in that they are more focused on the quality and content of the discussions themselves and less directly on individual skill development for the participants.
- We've continued to build our capacity for organizing, convening, and facilitating community conversations and streamlining our processes for working with partners, publicizing and recruiting, preparing facilitation plans, and reporting on outcomes.



INTRODUCTION TO COLLABORATIVE DISCUSSION

5-session series, September - November, 2021. Approximately 20 participants per session, with the same participants throughout the whole series). This series introduced [IF's Toolkit for Collaborative Discussion](#) to community conversation participants and was a successful experiment in adapting the Toolkit for use in a non-academic context. Our partners for this series were the Diversity Relations Council and the Center for LifeLong Learning, both at [Leisure World-Maryland](#).



FILMS & CONVERSATIONS, THE HUMAN CONDITION(ED): EXPLORING SOCIAL CONNECTIONS AND DISCONNECTIONS

5-session series, September - November, 2021. Approximately 20 participants per session. This series explored different forces of social connection and disconnection in contemporary society as well as ways we might address those forces. Based on participant feedback, this series was one of our most well received online community conversations thus far. It was convened in partnership with [Iona Senior Services](#) and the [DC Department of Aging & Community Living](#).

"I think this was the greatest series, I think, that you have done in a very long time. I liked this film series much better than some of the other series previously. Because this showed something that professional people have put together that really made one understand the salient points of what they want to say."

Olga, Community Conversation Participant

COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS



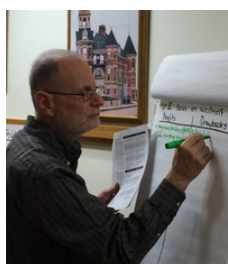
LGBTQ+ GENERATIONS

3-session series, November 2021. Approximately 15 participants per session. This series used short films as the catalyst for discussion. This was our first series that was specifically crafted around the concerns of, and for, a marginalized population--the LGBTQ members of the [Capitol Hill Village](#). One key area of learning for us was how to frame the discussion, and the discussion agreements, to be affirming of the community we were trying to engage. Our working focus was “first, do no harm.” This was our first series organized with Capitol Hill Village (CHV), a membership organization that is part of the [Village Movement](#) focused on engaging and empowering neighbors to build a vibrant, inclusive and age-friendly community. The advance development work for this series (developing the concept, selecting the films, and developing the facilitation plans for each session) was done in collaboration with CHV staff.



THE INVASION OF UKRAINE-WHAT IT MEANS FOR DEMOCRACY

3-session series, March 2022. Approximately 20 participants per session. This series was developed in response to the cataclysmic Russian invasion and interest in exploring what it might mean for democracy everywhere. The concept, series description, and facilitation plans were developed by the CC team, and the series was convened in partnership with Iona Senior Services. Participants responded quite positively to the sessions.



AWARE & ACTIVE CITIZENS (AAC) OF MERRILL, WISCONSIN

In March and April 2022, IF helped in planning and facilitating collaborative discussions for this citizen group, which was formed in response to an IF-facilitated community conversation series in 2016-17 (“Building Merrill Together”).

*“Thank you, again for creating this series. I needed this help to think things through.
--Sarah, Community Conversation Participant*

UPCOMING ACTIVITIES & POSSIBILITIES

- **Transition to In-person Programming.** We have begun preliminary planning for a possible transition back to conducting in-person community conversations.
- **[Four Freedoms & Beyond: Who We Were Then, Who We Are Now, and Who We Want to Be.](#)** Pursuant to an approved proposal for collaborative support, IF is providing partial funding and certain in-kind support (developing facilitation plans, training volunteer facilitators, facilitating) for a participatory civic engagement and community conversation project to be held in the rural community of Princeton, Illinois in May 2022. This project is centered around Norman Rockwell's "Four Freedoms" paintings displayed alongside updated, "revisited" versions by photographer Maggie Meiners with the goal of engaging citizens and catalyzing discussion. The project includes 3 public events with community conversations as well as an art display, school curriculum, an essay contest, and accompanying articles in local media.
- **Resources.** We are planning to format and revise our growing library of facilitation plans and make them easy for others to find, download, and use for discussions on their own—whether in community programming, educational contexts, or otherwise.

"I think I got a much better idea on how to participate in a conversation. I find myself, in a lot of meetings just, talking over other people because I agree or disagree. I'm learning to have more patience and to find some positive attribute or follow-up to their reasoning. That doesn't mean I'm going to eventually agree with them, but at least I have more information."

--Linda

"I learned how to listen patiently and respectfully to others and how important that listening actually is before one expresses an opinion. And then there's also when we talked about cultural diversity and the humility as an outcome of it all. So, I thank you all very much. And also, my fellow participants, I appreciate very much and learning from each other is great, very valuable. Thank you."

--Carmen

"Thank you, the thing I'm really working on is going deeper. So that if someone in a group makes a point, or ask a question, rather than allowing it to just keep going on to some other subject to try to stop it, or at least ask a follow up question. Can you tell me more? Or tell me, by making that suggestion, what would we, as a group, get out of it? Or can you be more specific? Sometimes it takes a week for me to realize, Ah, I missed an opportunity. But I, I figure, at least I'm aware, more and more when I miss an opportunity. So, at some point, I'll use it. So, thank you, I found this very, very helpful, practical. I thank you very much for a very meaty experience."

--Mary

EDUCATION

The Education team focused primarily on supporting and growing the [Collaborative Discussion Project](#) and experimenting with online discussion pedagogy for asynchronous classrooms during this reporting period.

Key insights:

- The Collaborative Discussion Project is in a growth phase as we continue to expand the [toolkit](#), offer more trainings to build capacity and increase our number of collaborative discussion coaches, certificate programs, and certificates awarded.
- We are beginning to imagine how to connect IF's community conversation programs with our educational work by inviting certificate program participants to practice skill development in our community conversation programs.
- Collaborative Discussion Project partners are expanding our reach by introducing the toolkit and certificate programs at conferences and within new networks. We will not immediately know the impact of this outreach, but it signals well for our project.



COLORADO STATE LIBRARY TRAINING

This past fall we were approached by Amy Phillips (Loveland Public Library) and Christine Kreger (Colorado State Library) to offer a cohort training in Collaborative Discussion for rural librarians in the state.

- This resulted in a 5-week (15 hour total) training conducted online
- It was co-facilitated with 5 collaborative partners (from prior trainings) which helped to expand our capacity for future trainings
- Produced 11 new Collaborative Discussion Coaches



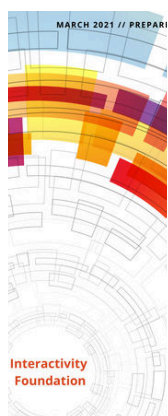
COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE GATHERINGS

As part of our Collaborative Discussion Project, we have begun to offer regular monthly gatherings for collaborative discussion coaches, curriculum contributors, and folks interested in collaborative discussion. These gatherings are designed to be an open space for sharing best practices, puzzles, problems, and new toolkit activities. So far we have offered 4 meetings with participation averaging around 16 people per session.

"The Collaborative Discussion Training opened up a wealth of information, tools and discussions which addressed the tricky area of interpersonal and group decision making and project design. It hit the essential areas of ethics, philosophy and practicality which both stretched and enlightened our group of librarians. Thanks to the expert and inspiring guidance of the facilitators!"

-Stephanie Ralph, Library Director of Summit County, Colorado

EDUCATION



COLLABORATIVE
DISCUSSION
CERTIFICATE

COLLABORATIVE DISCUSSION CERTIFICATE PROGRAMS

During the current reporting period, we have helped to develop and support the following IF Certificate Programs in Collaborative Discussion:

- Susan Cushman, Nassau Community College/SUNY, Fall 2021
- John Gastil, Penn State, Fall 2021
- Megan Smith, Queens University, Fall 2021
- Lori Britt, James Madison University, Fall 2021
- Taiyi Sun, Christopher Newport University, Fall 2021
- Alkida Hasaj, University of Shkoder, Albania, Winter 2021/2022
- Ed Lee, Emory University, Winter 2021/2022
- Kara Dillard, James Madison University, Spring 2022
- Kirsten Isgro, State University of New York at Plattsburgh, Spring 2022
- Susan Cushman, Nassau Community College/SUNY, Spring 2022



FACULTY AND INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGNER WORKSHOPS

Megan Smith, past summer training participant and collaborative discussion coach, offered two workshops at UNC-Charlotte. She offered an introduction to the Toolkit to faculty and instructional designers. We worked with Megan on the development and facilitation of these workshops. Total of 23 participants.



WESLEYAN COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP TRAINING

We collaborated with Melanie Doherty at Wesleyan College as part of their Mellon grant, which focuses on facilitating community conversations to explore what “racial repair” might look like in Macon, Georgia.

- We conferred about how to structure an IF discussion as a demonstration of how they might conduct their community conversations.
- We facilitated a 2-hour session in October '21 where the participants engaged in an IF-style exploration of the questions they wanted to explore for the grant, followed by a debriefing to discuss the process we used.
- The event included just over 15 participants, a mix of mostly community members and some faculty.

NEW COLLABORATIVE DISCUSSION PROJECT WORKING GROUPS

We created two member-led teams designed to help advance the collaborative discussion project. Work products from both teams will launch this summer and fall.

- Assessment Team, will focus on evaluating participant learning outcomes in our Collaborative Discussion Certificate Programs.
- New Certificate Program Award Team will award financial support to innovative or creative Collaborative Discussion Certificate Programs.



EDUCATION

ASYNCHRONOUS DISCUSSION EXPERIMENTATIONS

The following discussion series were facilitated by Jack Byrd via the LinkedIn discussion platform. Each discussion series was conducted asynchronously and convened weekly with the expectation of regular contributions throughout the week. Most series lasted approximately 15 weeks. From these experimentations, Byrd has created a series of asynchronous facilitation tips that can be shared individually or as a collection.

1. Innovation Leadership (Fall 2021/Spring 2022)

A discussion series with students who belong to the Society of Women Engineers. The discussions explore innovation leadership experiences of women throughout history to the present, with a focus on what it takes for women to become innovation leaders (27 participants).

2. Joy (Fall 2021)

A discussion series that explores what brings true joy to a person's life. The participants were Industrial Engineering alumni from the late 1970s to the present time (15 participants).

3. Becoming an Innovation Leader (Spring 2022)

A discussion series focusing on the personal traits of innovation leadership. The participants were primarily undergraduate students in Industrial Engineering (16 participants).

4. Change (Spring 2022)

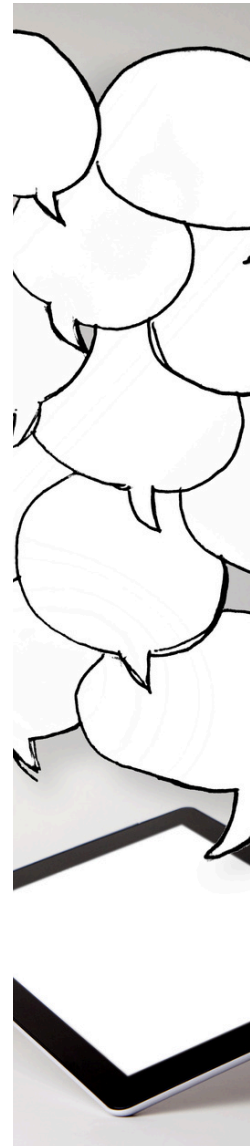
A discussion series that explores the various challenges to bringing about change. The participants are graduates from the last 5 years in Industrial Engineering (12 participants).

5. Entrepreneurship (Spring 2022)

This involved two discussions on the personal traits involved in an entrepreneurial career. The participants were students enrolled in a Technology Entrepreneurship class (41 participants).

6. College to Career (Fall 2021/Spring 2022)

These discussions involved an exploration of the "soft skills" employers find lacking in recent college graduates. The participants were students in the College to Career class (46 participants).



UPCOMING ACTIVITIES & POSSIBILITIES

- In May, we will launch our LinkedIn badges for Collaborative Discussion. Participants who complete a certificate program will receive instructions on how to claim their badge on LinkedIn. We will also be offering badges to our Collaborative Discussion Coaches who successfully complete the 15-hour training in Collaborative Discussion.

PARTNERSHIPS

BRIDGE ALLIANCE (BA)

We continue to explore how we might make the most of IF's membership in this network, especially in terms of amplifying the reach of IF activities, via the BA platform Citizen Connect (where we post announcements and registration links for IF discussion events), and in terms of clarifying IF's core mission of promoting citizen-centered democracy via civil dialogue.

LISTEN FIRST COALITION (LFC)

LFC is a network of civil dialogue organizations, of which IF is a member. The network is currently pooling efforts to boost the America Talks event and the connected National Week of Conversation, for which IF will offer a Community Conversation event. The network is currently coordinating efforts to develop assessment tools to measure impacts of civil dialogue experiences.

PHILANTHROPY FOR ACTIVE CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT (PACE)

PACE continues to serve as a useful partner for collaborative learning about the work of promoting civil democracy. PACE's various meetings, in small and large groups, have proven helpful for our articulation of IF's mission-related activities and for expanding IF's connections within the civil democracy sector.

NATIONAL COALITION FOR DIALOGUE AND DELIBERATION

The NCDD remains a valuable and supportive home network for IF and plays a vital role as a convener for collaborative learning opportunities within the civil dialogue field. IF Fellows regularly take part in, and benefit from, these opportunities.

KETTERING FOUNDATION (KF)

We continue our ongoing relationship with the KF, which shares IF's focus on citizen-centered democracy. The KF Forums have created valuable opportunities to learn from and with others working in our field and to bolster IF's network connections.

DC MARYLAND VIRGINIA DEMOCRACY LEARNING COMMUNITY

This is a nascent collaborative effort spearheaded by a DC-area nonprofit called Learning Life. Through online panel discussions convened as "Democracy Dinners," they are attempting to grow a local movement focused on expanding deep engagement and collaboration among a broad base of citizens for citizen-centered democracy. This group shares IF's primary orientation toward a robust vision of democracy,

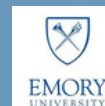
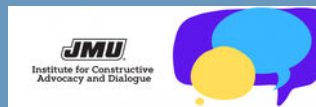
PARTNERSHIPS

SUSTAINED COMMUNITY CONVERSATION PARTNERSHIPS

- IONA Senior Services (Washington, D.C.)
- Diversity Relations Council at Leisure World (Silver Spring, Maryland)
- DC Public Library (Washington, D.C.)
- Guy Mason Community (Washington, D.C.)
- Capitol Hill Village (Washington, DC)
- Midwest Partners Foundation (Princeton, IL)

SUSTAINED EDUCATION PARTNERSHIPS

- Wabash Democracy and Public Discourse Initiative (Crawfordsville, IN)
- Institute for Constructive Advocacy and Dialogue at James Madison University (Harrisburg, VA)
- West Virginia University (Morgantown, WV)
- Wesleyan College (Macon, GA)
- Colorado State Library System (Denver, CO)
- Nassau Community College/SUNY (Garden City, NY)
- Emory University (Atlanta, GA)
- State University of New York at Plattsburgh (Plattsburgh, NY)



COMMUNICATION

HIDDEN HEROES SERIES

In January, 2022 we released a new series on LinkedIn called Hidden Heroes. These messages focus on people who are generally unknown today, but their contributions to everyday innovations are incredible. These messages have been released as packages, with the first package being on DNA. These are hidden heroes that have been critical to medical science and DNA from its first discovery until today. This series is still a work in progress with new stories being written almost daily. Topics cover all aspects of society including: vitamins, social security, toothbrushes, health insurance, etc. We have released 13 stories to date.

EDUCATION BLOG ("THINK ABOUT..." SERIES)

This blog series wrapped up in early December 2021. The Education Team decided to re-release the series but packaged with a specific focus. From mid-December until the end of February we re-released 11 blog posts focused on Course Setup. A new series focused on Strategies for Collaborative Classroom Discussions began in March 2022 and will run for 18 weeks.

EXPLORATION BLOG ("JUST IMAGINE..." SERIES)

This blog series continues to release new posts weekly. These blogs cover a wide range of topics including: citizenship, democracy, civility, exploration of possibilities, innovation, etc. The weekly blog posts are designed with a focus on societal issues and are used as efforts in advancing our networks. We published 30 posts between October and April 2021.

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