Beyond 250

Talking about Equality, Monuments, Memories, Liberty, Freedom, and the Next 250 Years

A Toolkit
About Beyond 250

Using the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence as a jumping off point, Oregon Humanities is working with libraries of all types—public, academic, school, and tribal—to support public conversations, letter exchanges, and other activities that get people thinking and talking together, within their communities and across the state.

One part of our Beyond 250 effort is training library staff, board members, volunteers, and partners to strengthen their skills in leading conversations about vital issues and ideas across differences, beliefs, and backgrounds. Training participants will learn about facilitation and reflective conversation, practice new skills and techniques, and learn to design and facilitate conversations that allow people and groups to learn more about themselves and others. Our hope is that this toolkit, along with participation in these trainings, will help people lead engaging and participatory community conversations related to the 250th anniversary and other important topics all around Oregon in the years to come.

We will also host a special version of Dear Stranger, our public letter-exchange program. We’re partnering with libraries across Oregon to host writing stations where members of the public of all ages can share their visions for the future of our communities. If you’re interested in starting an exchange in your community, check out our how-to guide at oregonhumanities.org.
Why talk (and listen and wonder)?

Reflective conversations are opportunities for focused yet open-ended dialogue about ideas; instead of aiming for consensus, finding solutions, or debating an argument, the goals are exploration and listening to others.

This kind of discussion revolves around posing challenging and resonant questions that can’t be easily answered. Many reflective conversations use images, texts, or other media to bring more light to the topic at hand and to anchor, equalize, and raise the level of discussion.

Reflecting on ideas in the company of others through conversation is one important way—among many—for people to think about their beliefs and the relationship between what they think and how they act in the world. It’s also a way to build community, gain understanding of a variety of perspectives, and strengthen how we work and live together.
How to lead a reflective conversation

Engage and participate

+ Attend an Oregon Humanities Conversation Project program, Consider This, So Much Together, or other public event to get more ideas about what a reflective conversation looks like in action. Listen to our podcast, The Detour, which asks big questions and explores themes that resonate with Beyond 250. Check out upcoming events on the Oregon Humanities web calendar at oregonhumanities.org/events.

Think and ask

+ Select a topic or question that invites a variety of perspectives. Visit Oregon Humanities’ current Conversation Project catalog for suggestions, but do not feel limited by these topics—your interest and passion are key as the conversation leader or program host.

+ Develop a clear, inviting, and provocative question or two to frame the conversation. Good questions for stimulating dialogue are open-ended, don’t require specific knowledge, and allow participants to connect an idea to their personal experience. Questions should also not have right or wrong answers, nor should you be able to answer them with a simple “yes” or “no.” Some examples: “Where do you feel most at home?”; “What is education for?”; “What is community?” And some examples of questions related to the 250th: “How does our nation’s commitment to equality show up in your life?”; “What kinds of liberties are most important to you?”; “What do you hope for from public anniversaries or memorials?”
Connect and invite

+ Decide whether your conversation will be open to the public or to a select group of people, such as family or coworkers.
+ Secure an appropriate venue based on the people you hope will participate; set aside at least ninety minutes for the conversation.
+ Invite participants in advance. If your conversation is open to the general public, spread the word broadly through local print and broadcast media, social media, and word of mouth.

Provoke and challenge

+ Lead the conversation using the tips and best practices in this toolkit.
+ Inspire curiosity, but don’t feel the need to be exhaustive. One sign of a good reflective conversation is that participants leave with more questions than answers—and that they’re still talking when the formal program ends.
Facilitation tips and best practices

As a facilitator, you are tasked with creating an open space for conversation, framing the questions participants will discuss, and guiding the conversation so that it is engaging and exploratory. Below are a few tips and best practices for leading reflective conversations.

Arrange chairs in a circle.
Circles are much more conducive to full participation and conversation.

Use people’s names.
Use names and encourage participants to do the same; this will help personalize the discussion.

Set a relaxed and open tone.
People generally feel most comfortable when they know what to expect. Also, acknowledge that you understand that some folks are active listeners, are shy, or perhaps are uncomfortable speaking in a group. The more comfortable you seem, the more comfortable participants will be.

Get people talking.
Listening first inspires listening throughout; get participants’ voices going from the onset. You might open by either asking participants what brought them to the conversation, or posing your key question(s), gathering brief, initial responses, and then allowing the conversation to open from there.
Structure the conversation in different ways.

Have participants talk and/or do activities in pairs, small groups, and with the full group throughout the conversation; this encourages connection, openness, and cross-pollination of ideas.

Use texts to ground the conversation.

Consider using images, short texts, essays, articles, short films, speeches, or other media to bring more light to the topic at hand and to anchor, equalize, and raise the level of discussion. Texts should be accessible in their content/language and open up multiple perspectives and interpretations. Ask participants questions about the text, moving from clarification (e.g., “What’s going on here?”) to significance (e.g., “What does this mean?”) to implication (e.g., “How does what we’re talking about here affect what we do in the world?”).

Encourage differences to emerge.

Any group will have important differences of opinion, no matter how much they seem to agree at the onset. Help participants perceive and explore these differences by inviting varied perspectives and interpretations. Remind participants and yourself that the goal is reflection and mutual understanding rather than consensus or persuasion.

Dig deeper.

Think about how to connect, build on, and follow up on the ideas that participants raise. Some suggested questions and prompts to use include the following:

- Could you tell me more about…?
- Could you explain to me what you mean when you say…?
- So far, what I have heard you say is… Is that accurate?
What do the rest of you think about…?
It sounds to me like you value… Is that correct?
Does anyone see this idea differently or approach it from a different angle than what we’ve talked about so far?
Have you heard something that surprised you?
Why don’t we all think about that for a moment? (Use the power of silence)

Shift attention from yourself to the group.
The aim is for the group to have a conversation, not to treat you as their teacher. Encourage participants to talk to and ask questions of one another—not just you.

Anticipate challenges.
Given the subject matter of the discussion, what challenges can you anticipate? Some suggested ways of addressing challenging situations include the following:

- Ask clarifying questions and approach the challenge with a spirit of curiosity (e.g., “May we dig into this a little bit?”)
- Describe a challenging comment and its apparent result (e.g., “I noticed that after you said…the room got very quiet.”)
- Remember that one of your greatest resources is the group. Ask for input, reactions, suggestions, or ideas from others in the room if you get stuck or find yourself having difficulty handling a challenging person or behavior. For example, “Can anyone help me better understand what ___ is saying? I’m struggling with this.”

Conclude each conversation in a meaningful way. Take a few minutes to reflect and come back to the central idea or question that framed the conversation. You might try ending with a go-round and a prompt such as, “What’s one thing you’ll take away from today’s conversation?” or “What’s one question you’re walking with?”
Talking Beyond 250

Below is a list of questions and prompts to help get people thinking and talking about equality, monuments, memories, liberty, freedom, and their hopes and concerns for the next 250 years. Use this list as inspiration for holding your own conversations.

Suggested discussion questions about **Equality**

+ What is a word or phrase that comes to you when you hear “equality”?  
+ What is equality?  
+ What does the ideal of equality stand for?  
+ Why does it matter?  
+ How does our country live up to and fall short of the ideal of equality?  
+ What do we hope for as the country moves forward?  
+ Over the past few weeks, what is one way our beliefs or practices related to equality have show up in your life? What are ways where you’ve felt the opposite?  
+ What does equality mean, 250 years after that phrase “all men are created equal” was written? What should it mean, for you and your community?  
+ What’s one way you’ve benefited from the expectation that all men (people) are created equal? One way you’ve felt reality come up short against this truth?
+ What’s your sense of how understandings of equality have changed over the past couple hundred years—and how do you hope understandings will continue to change?
+ What’s good about the claim that it is self-evidently true that all men are created equal?
+ Would this be one of the first “truths” you would name, if asked?
+ Why has “equality” largely gotten a bad name, or been replaced (e.g. by “equity”)?

Questions about Monuments & Memories

+ Why do we build monuments?
+ What stories do monuments tell? Whose stories are not told in our current monuments?
+ What is important to memorialize?
+ How do monuments and memorials teach history? What is needed to teach history?
+ How is a monument different from a memorial?
+ What would be a reason to remove a monument?
+ Who should be involved in deciding what monuments are created and where they are placed?
+ What is the significance of monuments existing in public spaces?
+ How do we know if/what we should add context or update monuments and memorials to reflect new understandings?
+ How can we transition from old ideals to new ones?
Questions about Liberty & Freedom

+ What does “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” mean to you?
+ What limits should there be to personal freedoms?
+ Who does not have the same access to freedom and liberty as you do?
+ How does your idea of freedom fit with the idea of having rules?
+ What is freedom worth?
+ Whose freedoms and liberties are centered?
+ Who has had access to the promises in the Declaration of Independence?
+ What is needed to continue to have our liberties and freedoms?

Questions about the Next 250 Years

+ What are your hopes for the next 250 years?
+ What feels “met” as you think about the hopes in the declaration of independence? What feels “missing”?
+ What places or space should be preserved?
+ What do you envision as the “future” for your community?
+ How might America’s role globally evolve over the next 250 years?
+ How could governance structures adapt to meet the needs of a changing society?
Suggested writing, discussion, or activity prompts

+ What is the Oregon you want to live in?

+ How do you practice independence in your life? How do you practice interdependence? What do these words bring up for you?

+ If we were to update the Declaration of Independence, what parts or words would you change? What would you add? Take out?

+ If a “declaration of interdependence” were to be written, what would you want to be written in that document?

One last note

Remember that the big goal here is to get people thinking, listening, and talking about ideas and questions that matter to them. There’s no just-right way to do it—and there are lots of good reasons to do it. Please contact Oregon Humanities if you want to talk about planning a discussion, inviting participants, facilitating, or anything else related to building community through conversation. We’d also love to hear about what you’ve done and how it went. Send a photo, and we’ll use it to spread the word about the power of conversation.
About Oregon Humanities

Oregon Humanities gets people together across differences, beliefs, and backgrounds to share ideas, listen, think, and grow. Through events, classes, grants, public programs, and a triannual magazine, Oregon Humanities builds more connected communities.

Our mission

Oregon Humanities connects people and communities through conversation, storytelling, and participatory programs to inspire understanding and collaborative change.

Our vision

An Oregon that invites diverse perspectives, explores challenging questions, and strives for just communities.

Core values

+ Community
+ Equity
+ Imagination
For more information about Oregon Humanities or to learn how to participate in our Beyond 250 programming, contact us at:

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Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this toolkit do not necessarily represent those of the National Endowment for the Humanities.