



Continuum Dialogue

Developed by Marylyn Wentworth and expanded and enriched by many facilitators in the National School Reform Faculty.

Time

From 30 minutes to an hour and a half.

Purpose and Description

The Continuum Dialogue is a provocative yet non-threatening way to get to know the people one works with: their perspectives, their beliefs, their opinions on hard issues, how they think about themselves and others, what they think about teaching and learning. It is also useful to see where people stand on difficult issues that need decisions and hear them out with respect and interest.

The Continuum Dialogue requires the participants to physically stand on a continuum arc according to where each person places themselves between the two statements that form the beginning and end of the continuum. The Continuum is in an arc rather than a straight line so people can see one another as they speak and listen.

The facilitator of a Continuum is generally a neutral person who is not part of the group doing the Continuum. As a group gets more experienced with this process, an “insider” can effectively facilitate. The reason for an outside facilitator is that it is important for every person in the group to stand on the Continuum arc.

The facilitator establishes Norms for the Continuum, which are:

- Listen with respect and interest
- Speak with candor
- No one’s comments will be challenged or argued
- Thoughtful reflection on others’ responses is okay
- The facilitator is responsible for the process until he/she steps back
- When the facilitator steps back, everyone is responsible for the process

The statements that establish the ends of the Continuum must allow for differences without there being a right and wrong place to stand. For example a continuum that addresses the length of the school day goes from “I think our school day is too long for elementary students” to “I think our school day is too short for elementary students.” That is a reasonable continuum as neither end is right or wrong. However, the topic “Who should teach?” with the extremes being, “I think it is okay for people who dislike children to teach,” to “I don’t think anyone who dislikes children should be teaching.” wouldn’t work as the “dislikes children and can teach” end could be assumed to be a bad place to stand by most people.

When the topic and the two ends of the Continuum have been established, the facilitator stands in the open side of the arc and asks people at different points in the continuum why they chose to stand where they did. People explain why they chose to stand there with no interruptions or questions. There is no need to ask everyone unless it matters to hear from every person for some reason, as generally there will be a series of Continuums that make up the dialogue and everyone should be called on at some point to respond. Sometimes, “Why did you chose to stand there?” isn’t the right question to ask. For examples of different questions, see the practice rounds in the Steps.

After several Continuums, or when a group of people is accustomed to them, the facilitator can step back and people in the Continuum can ask others why they chose to stand where they did. The facilitator would step forward and intervene should there be any confrontational questions asked, disrespect shown, or any rebuttal to the person who explained why they chose to stand where they did. When the dialogue progresses to the point of the facilitator stepping back, secondary questions or comments may come forth after the initial “why did you chose to stand there?” such as, “I expected that you would have stood further toward ‘this’ end. It is interesting to me to see how much I assumed about you without asking you what you really thought.” Or, “I had no idea you had gone through all of that. It explains so much!” Or, “I hadn’t thought of it that way. In fact I think I have to move around the continuum closer to you.” The dialogue portion happens at this point, always centered around, “Why did you chose to stand there?” and with respectful listening. Sometimes there are no comments, only careful listening to people as they state their reasons for standing where they are, and that is fine.

In a Continuum that will address a hard issue it is generally best to have several Continuums prior to the “big” question to establish norms of response and to learn about each other in helpful ways. An example might be a difference of opinion as to whether a high school should go to block scheduling or stay with a seven period day. Possible questions for a series of Continuum:

- How do students learn best? “Students this age learn best through a variety of shorter learning experiences,” to “Students this age learn best when they can focus on a few in-depth learning experiences at a time.”
- How do students learn best? “Students learn best when they have constant, daily, classes,” to “Students learn best when they have space between classes for reflection and synthesis.”
- Time for in-depth work. “I think our students have plenty of opportunities to do in depth work” to “I don’t think our students have adequate opportunities to do in-depth work.”
- What are the gains and losses in block scheduling? “There’s a lot to lose by going to block scheduling,” to “There’s a lot to gain by going to block scheduling.”
- How is my teaching affected? “I do my best teaching in smaller, consistent blocks of time,” to “I do my best teaching when I have fewer students for a longer time to do in-depth work.”
- How does this affect me personally? “I am unsure how to teach in longer blocks of time,” to “I have some ideas about how to teach in longer blocks of time.”

A Continuum should never be a vote, or even consensus. It wouldn’t work to say “At this point, I want to change to block scheduling,” to “At this point, I don’t want to change to block scheduling.” All those standing somewhere in the middle make it a useless attempt at decision-making. One could state the topic as “Let’s see where we are on the topic of block scheduling,” then ask the questions and listen to everyone’s reasons for standing where they are. Thus it becomes a learning experience that can lead to a good decision. People calmly listen to other perspectives and grow in understanding their colleagues. Solutions even rise as the Continuum unfolds.

As people get accustomed to the Continuum Dialogue, it is possible to take three more steps:

1. At the end of a Continuum the facilitator can invite anyone who has changed their mind one way or the other and wants to move, to do so, and explain why they chose to move.
2. The facilitator can ask if anyone in the group has a Continuum they would like to propose. That person sets up the Continuum and facilitates the discussion with the support of the regular facilitator. This gives participants the opportunity to go deeper than the facilitator might. It requires trust to do this well, although sometimes people want to ask fairly simple questions that just didn't occur to the facilitator. It is the facilitator's responsibility to be sure the Continuum is productive and not a hidden question to get at something or someone.
3. The facilitator can give anyone in the Continuum permission to move anyone else to the place they think they should be and tell the whole group why they moved that person there. The person moved can respond and either stay there or go back to where they were. This process gets to the differences between what we know of ourselves and what we project to others. For example on a continuum like "I think I am a capable leader," to "Leadership is not my strongest attribute," a surprising amount of moving goes on as many very effective leaders do not perceive themselves that way, and learn a lot about how their colleagues perceive them.

Steps

1. The facilitator describes the process of the Continuum:
 - How statements representing the extremes of a topic mark the two ends of the Continuum
 - Where the Continuum will be by physically walking from one end to the other
 - Explains the Norms
2. The facilitator gives the group one or more practice rounds. Below are possibilities:
The topic is stated and the extremes of the topic are the Continuum.
 - The importance of time:
always on time.....time doesn't mean anything
(a secondary question might be, "What does time feel like to you?")
 - Your desk at school (or at home)
neat and orderly nearly all the time.....utter chaos
(a better question here is, "What role does your desk play for you?")
 - Time of day you do your best work:
Dawn.....Deep in the dark night
 - Tolerance for ambiguity:
Like detailed, written plans.....Go with whatever comes
 - Size of group you work best with:
Alone.....The whole school, even the district, maybe the world
 - Physical proximity boundaries - how close people can stand and talk with you. (practice this one and you'll see exactly where boundaries are as people back up when you get to the boundary)
2 inches.....2 feet
(another question here is "What happens when people pass your boundary?")
3. The facilitator begins the Continuum Dialogue by stating the first question/topic and physically walking off the Continuum, stating the two end preferences that mark the Continuum.
4. Participants go and stand in the place that best represents their preference/opinion/belief.

5. The facilitator asks a variety of people at a variety of points on the Continuum why they chose to stand where they did, or another question if that is not the appropriate one - but it usually is.
6. After enough people have been asked, the facilitator either invites people to move if they have changed their opinion, stating why; opens the dialogue by stepping back and allowing participants to ask one another questions or comment on their new understandings; or moves on to the next question. As Continuum have their own pace, the facilitator has to judge when to move on and when to extend the dialogue. Use as many Continuums as are appropriate to the topic at hand or to the time allotted.
7. Several variations can happen here:
 - Participants can propose the questions/topics, set up the Continuum, and facilitate
 - The facilitator can invite participants to move other participants to spots they think are more representative of that person, and tell why. The moved person can respond.
8. The group sits down in a circle to debrief, talking about what they learned and how that might impact the work they do together. Discuss the process - what worked, what didn't and what might be improved for another time.