

Activity 3.5 Seeking Divergent Thinking

(Surround the Topic)

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Description

This activity describes how to systematically examine a topic from a multi-dimensional approach. It encourages divergent thinking by asking participants to generate different questions and viewpoints about a single area of concern, deepening appreciation for complexity.

Learning Goals

- Practice examining an issue from multiple perspectives and dimensions.
- Practice crafting discussion questions that examine different dimensions of a topic.

Instructions (50 minutes)

<p>Set Up</p>	<p>Prepare for the Activity</p> <p>Select a broad issue that is important or pressing for the group (i.e. Housing, Food Security, Climate Change, AI, etc.).</p> <p>Share the Surrounding the Topic Diagram on the board, screen, or as a handout. Place the topic at the center.</p> <p>Share the Crafting Discussion Questions Worksheet.</p> <p>Begin by introducing the learning goals of this activity.</p>	
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¹ **Citation for this activity:** Shannon Wheatley Hartman (2023). Seeking Divergent Thinking. In Hartman and Byrd (Eds), The Interactivity Foundation Collaborative Discussion Toolkit. Retrieved from <https://www.collaborativediscussionproject.com/activities/module-3>

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<p>Step One</p>	<p>Generate Possible Dimensions</p> <p>As a full group, invite participants to generate a list of dimensions that affect or are affected by this topic. Dimensions tend to be broad categories like governance, technology, religion/spirituality, culture, law/ethics, politics, psychology, arts, media, economics, environment, etc.</p> <p>Sample dimensions are included in the Surrounding the Topic Diagram. Use or replace these. As a group, populate all external circles of the diagram with different but relevant dimensions.</p>	<p>5 min</p>
<p>Step Two</p>	<p>Craft Discussion Questions</p> <p>In pairs, ask participants to craft open ended questions for each dimension. Explain that the questions are to be designed for a discussion group. Instruct them to record these questions in the Crafting Discussion Questions Worksheet.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The questions should be open-ended (avoiding yes/no answers). • Participants should try to briefly explain the rationale for this question. • Once teams have multiple questions, ask them to consider the strategic ordering of questions and record their thoughts in the first column. <p>Facilitator Tip: Anticipate that some participants might use a generic formula for each question, such as: “What is the [insert dimension] importance of this topic?” Encourage them to write a unique question for each dimension that is open-ended but specific enough to spark discussion.</p>	<p>10 min</p>
<p>Step Three</p>	<p>Discuss Questions in Small Groups</p> <p>Return to the full group or create small discussion groups (6-8 ppl), and begin discussing the topic.</p> <p>Ask for a volunteer to share their first question. Discuss the question.</p> <p>As the discussion unfolds, invite another participant to share a question that explores a new dimension.</p> <p>The discussion group may only have enough time to discuss 2-3 questions. Instruct them that it is better to focus on a couple of dimensions of the topic and not try to discuss all dimensions or questions.</p> <p>Remind them that crafting discussion questions help them to mentally prepare for the discussion, even if they don’t get a chance to share their questions.</p>	<p>25 min</p>

Step Four	<p>Debrief as a Full Group</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Would anyone like to share a favorite discussion question that they weren't able to introduce during the discussion? • What does the exercise of "surrounding the topic" do? How did new or less expected dimensions open up the discussion? • How did you experience crafting questions? How did this help you prepare for our discussion? • How do you think the discussion would have gone today if we did not surround the topic or prepare multiple discussion questions in advance? 	10 min
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Reflection Journal

- How and when might you "surround the topic" in your own mind prior to a conversation? When is this a good strategy and when might this be discouraged or avoided?
- What are the strengths of divergent thinking? What are the limitations? When might convergence (or the coming together, sorting, and consolidating of ideas) be a necessary step?

Practice Journal

This week, in preparation for a meeting or discussion practice "surrounding the topic." Complete both worksheets prior to the discussion. After the discussion, reflect on how you performed? Did you feel more prepared? Did you offer insights or dimensions to the discussion that no one else thought of? Were you prepared when others offered new dimensions?

Dive Deeper: Additional Resources

- [Being a Discussion Catalyst](http://www.interactivityfoundation.org/being-a-discussion-catalyst/): Byrd, Jack. "Being a Discussion Catalyst." *Interactivity Foundation*, 20 May 2020, www.interactivityfoundation.org/being-a-discussion-catalyst/. Accessed 3 Sep. 2023.
Participants can be deferential to each other in discussions as they do not want to appear rude, so it is important to highlight the importance of being a catalyst of discussion by diving deeper into other participants' ideas.
- Explore the discursive construction of concepts using the surround the topic activity. For example: "My contention is that without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period." –Edward Said

Activity Cluster

3.5 Seeking Divergent Thinking
(Surround the Topic)

[3.8 Mapping Complexity
\(Fishbone Diagram\)](#)

[5.2 Developing an Awareness
of Stakeholders](#)