

Conversation Café: Location, Location



Originally the Conversation Café was designed to be in the “public square” – in a café, restaurant or community room – to reverse the taboo against “talking to strangers.” The method was designed so that friends, neighbors and strangers could meet in a café and have a stimulating conversation among people with diverse views but a shared desire for good exchanges with others. Now, the Conversation Cafe method is used in many places – cafes, classrooms, churches, conferences, community rooms and more. It’s yours to use where and when you want.

Cafés, restaurants and pubs are perfect sites. They are public. They serve food and drink, so there is nothing to prepare and nothing to clean up. They have many tables so if your group grows beyond 8, you can split up and have two conversations. They are free to you as a host, though please encourage all participants to “pay the rent” by buying something to eat or drink. Check the noise level – try for something fairly quiet. Anyone in the establishment can join in, making good conversation available to anyone – not just an invited and select few.

There are two ways to establish a Conversation Café at a café or restaurant. With independent establishments, ask the owner/manager if a group may meet there. Explain that a Conversation Café will bring benefits: repeat customers, new customers, enhanced sales, and free publicity. Ask for the schedule you want, but be willing to settle for a time when their business is slack. Ask to put a poster in the window announcing the time.

When approaching corporate chains, you may need to use a slightly different approach. Chains often cannot risk granting permission to community groups that might disturb the flow of business, nor do they usually encourage the posting of flyers. If you select a franchised establishment, it is possible for you to operate as would any group that chooses to meet in that setting – after all, it is a public space.

You can also host in your own home or a library, church, union hall or cafeteria. Some businesses, religious institutions and libraries offer free meeting spaces; community centers are reasonably priced.

Consider enlisting a friend, neighbor or co-worker as a ‘co-host’ to help you create this conversation. You can support each other, double your outreach, back each other up – and guarantee that there will at least be the two of you to have a great conversation! Inviting someone who thinks like you do gives you courage and camaraderie. If you choose a friend with different views and perspectives, though, s/he can help attract her friends and add to the diversity and thus the range and depth of the conversation. Either way is good.