

Hosting Guide for Unhurried Conversation

Unhurried Conversations were started in Cambridge in 2014 by Antony Quinn and Johnnie Moore. Our website Unhurried.org gives more of the context.

This is a short guide for people who want to host an Unhurried Conversation in their town or city.

Meetup

Most current hosts use meetup.com to administer promotion and administration. We find this site a very easy way to let people know about events.

There are costs with running a meetup account and some hosts ask for a small donation from participants to cover this.

You're welcome to try other ways of organising and publicising your group.

Current groups

We list all the current Meetup groups on the Unhurried website.

Invitation

Our general invitation to Unhurried Conversation says this:

In an unhurried conversation, there is time to think differently and connect with people in a refreshing way. Unhurried isn't always slow, but it has a pace where people find it easy to join in and not feel crowded out. And listening can be as satisfying as talking.

We'll use a simple format to create good, human interaction.

We don't always go into detail about the process in the invitation. You are welcome to adapt this form of words for your own group.

Meeting Space

The current Unhurried groups usually meet in Cafes, but we have occasionally used other spaces. The trick in cafes is finding ones that are quiet enough to allow a clear conversation with a larger group of people. That's easy enough with a group of 5 or 6. In Cambridge where we get up to 20, we've had to be quite careful about our choice of location.

If we get a large group and the venue is a bit noisy, we split into two smaller groups - in Cambridge we have plenty of experienced participants who can host a group.

We've also experimented with finding private rooms in venues and asking participants to contribute to the cost. Sometimes we've also included a meal as part of the event and used meet up to sell paid tickets for this format.

Process

Unhurried Conversations typically last up to around 90 minutes, although there is no magic time limit. We get everyone seated in a circle or oval so they can all see each other without straining. It's quite important that people don't sit outside the circle/oval - when sight lines are broken it disrupts the feeling of part of a single group.

We use a talking piece - usually an everyday object like a sugar bowl. When I start the group I hold it, and explain that *when you hold the bowl you speak, and if you aren't holding it, you get to listen and resist all urges to interrupt.*

Then I say, *when you're talking, talk to the whole group. By all means refer to others in the group, but share with everybody.*

I explain that *when you're done talking, don't pass the piece to anyone, just put it on the table. When you've finished speaking you are giving up control of what happens next.*

When the next person picks up the talking piece they might follow on from what's been said, or bring something new to the conversation. You can also hold silence by holding the talking piece, that might be useful if you just want to gather your thoughts, you still won't be interrupted.

You can ask questions, but don't expect that you will necessarily get answers, or you may get them but not straight away. (Asking questions and expecting answers, especially from individuals, tends to disrupt the flow)

I sometimes talk about *avoiding "ping pong" where the same two people alternate holding the bowl and effectively engage in a direct conversation with each other*, often asking and answering questions. If I see this happening in a group, I sometimes intervene to draw attention to it.

Sometimes, I address the fear, *"what if someone grabs the piece and talks for a long time?" I say, first, that doesn't seem to happen much, but if it does, I suggest you relax and enjoy it, like a theatrical performance.*

If people need to leave early or to use the toilet, it's fine just to get up and go, no need to make an announcement.

I sometimes get people to say their names but I don't go for introductions. People can do that as part of their turn if they want. Mostly I think introductions aren't necessary.

I guess safety is partly down to the intent and tone with which I open things. Not that I do anything special, but keeping it informal seems to work. I find that having lots of rules and agreements for groups, doesn't seem to make much difference. But be guided by your own experience. Some of hosts have made small tweaks the process based on local experience.

I usually close by giving a warning of when time is running out. Sometimes I suggest everyone says a few closing words. I always say thanks for coming when time's up, and let people know about future dates.

The effect of the talking piece is quite strong and generates a very different quality of conversation. People don't feel obliged to stick to a single topic and it's more satisfying when

many different ideas are shared. If the groups gets the idea that we have to stick to a subject, it easily becomes quite boring.

Your mileage may vary! In all our work, I remind myself that every group is different and expect the unexpected!

Support

Check out the website for a film about participants' reactions in Cambridge : <http://unhurried.org>

We're holding occasional web conference calls for our hosts and potential hosts, so you can share experiences and ask questions.

Contact me anytime for advice: johnnie.moore@gmail.com