

Proposal for: A National Network of Conversation Salons



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The Concept: To set up a national network of community forums in the form of Conversation Salons. These Conversation Salons would bring together a diverse cross section of people to discuss topics of deep concern to them about their own well-being, their communities and how to best deal with the profound changes happening in contemporary Irish society. Conversation Salons aim to connect people and build community through an open and inclusive sharing of ideas and opinions. They would provide a positive inspirational space to pro-actively problem solve and seek solutions at community level and ultimately bring into existence new initiatives.

In such arenas we could collectively awaken to our extraordinary potential and stretch our individual will into co-creating something great from currently untapped ideas allowing us to move forward in a more participatory and empowered way.

Pilot Project/Salons to date: I started Conversation Salons in 2014 and since then I have run over 50 of them in lots of different places such cafes, arts festivals, libraries, community groups, clubs, etc. The feedback has been very positive and I am currently working on an impact survey to collate past and on-going feedback.

Issues this project would address relevant to the National Planning Framework:

- Rebuilding community in the hearts of our cities and towns and protecting the many qualities of our rural communities
- Ensure every place realises it's potential/That community members reach their human potential
- Managing growth and development in a way that will support quality of life and well-being
- Building, maintaining and reweaving social capital

Applicable to work of: Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP), Public Participation Networks, Local Community Development Committees, Rural Development Programme.

The Problem: Social isolation/Human Disconnection/Breakdown of Community/Untapped Human Potential

Modern life has eroded many of the spaces or places or environments where face to face conversations took place, connections were made and people felt part of their community and society.

The Solution: Conversations Salons aim to act as an antidote to the effects of social isolation and human disconnection in the stressed and busy digital age such as disillusionment, loneliness, the breakdown of community, lack of civic engagement and the weakening of social fabric. Conversation Salons are relaxed informal café style gatherings where all different kinds of people can come together to have uplifting enriching conversations about a whole range of different topics. They are friendly positive events where you can meet new people, hear different opinions and ideas, develop fresh thinking and see new possibilities. Conversation Salons are about creating new opportunities for life enhancing encounters and exchanges.

Format for the Salons: The salon venues are laid out like a café with small tables seating usually four people at each. The salon has a host who facilitates the event, welcoming and introducing people, explaining the concept, giving some background and outlining the ground rules and format. When people arrive they are served tea and coffee and given a conversation menu but are also invited to raise the questions and issues most important to them. At half time half of the participants change tables so everyone gets to meet new people, circulate and hear different viewpoints. They are given a new conversation menu for the second half of the evening. The host closes the event by inviting people to share insights and thoughts about what they have discussed. The ideas that arise at the salons will be harvested for future consideration and use. Venues could vary from parish halls to cafes or hotels. Each event lasts for two and a half to three hours. Numbers of participants can range from twenty to sixty.

The Focus:

Creating opportunities for positive conversations about our future in Ireland and globally

Sharing and supporting each other's most positive aspirations

Involvement of diverse people, building new networks and strengthening the wider community

Features:

Strengths based/solution focused

Inviting exploration & stretching the boundaries of what is possible

Collaborative

The Premise guiding the salons: That bringing diverse people together in relaxed trusted spaces for enriching and meaningful conversation will have the **following positive outcomes:**

- Build community, a sense of belonging, connectedness, new social networks, social engagement
- Create incubator spaces for new ideas, fresh thinking, solutions and creativity
- Increase empathy, tolerance, compassion and understanding
- Personal empowerment, being inspired and motivated to make positive changes
- Greater civic engagement
- Diversity is celebrated, valued, seen as a resource
- Improved sense of well-being and positivity
- All voices are heard and respected

Influences & Related Work: The project reflects the experience of much of the international research and practice in this area.

- Dr Otto Scharmer, MIT, Theory U: Leading from the Future as it Emerges, tapping our collective capacity to create a future of greater possibility, generative listening, etc.
- Dr Sherry Turkle, MIT, her recent book, Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age
- The Art of Hosting and Harvesting Conversations That Matter, a global network, <http://www.artofhosting.org/>
- Dr Margaret Wheatley, her book, Turning To One Another, Simple Conversations To Restore Hope to the Future
- Matthew Lieberman, 2013, Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect. Social connections are as important to our survival and flourishing as the need for food, safety, and shelter.

International Context: There is an ever increasing number of similar projects arising around the world such as, Public Conversations in the US, Talk To Me London/Global, Tea with Strangers, New York Conversations, Big Talk, the Unleash project in Sweden, Salon Hosting, Austria & Kawaa, France. I am part of an international conversation collaborative of these groups called, Talk To Each Other, focusing on how to promote inclusivity, celebrate diversity, break down barriers and connect people through face to face conversation.

Underlying Principles: Civic engagement, social inclusion, developing social capital, activating untapped human potential, encouraging social entrepreneurs, building community, celebrating diversity

Feedback/What people liked about the salons: How people of all ages and backgrounds can listen and learn from one another/ The buzz and positive energy in the room /Heard new perspectives I had not heard before/I picked up food for thought/I was inspired by the people in my company/The relaxed atmosphere and people participating with enthusiasm/How uplifting it was/The meeting of people speaking from the heart that I didn't know before/Preconceptions left at the door/Meeting people I wouldn't normally meet/ The challenge of articulating my views/the warmth of human dialogue/testing my worldview and having it changed occasionally.

Bio for Heather Bourke, Life Coach, Group Facilitator & Host of Conversation Salons

I have worked for over 30 years in the areas of personal growth and human potential. I have a Bachelor's degree in Social Science from UCD and did my Masters in the University of British Columbia, Vancouver in Group Work and Cognitive Therapy. I worked as a counsellor in America and as a social worker in a wide range of community services in Ireland. I trained as a life coach in London. As an experienced group facilitator I love finding entertaining, creative, fun ways to bring about insights and shifts in peoples thinking and behaviour. I design forums and events where people can have evolutionary life changing conversations and experiences.

'We completely underestimate the power of human conversation to change the world. In these troubled, uncertain times, we don't need more command and control; we need better means to engage everyone's intelligence in solving challenges and crises as they arise.'

'There is no power greater than a community discovering what it cares about.'

Ask: "What's possible?" not "What's wrong?" Keep asking.

Notice what you care about.

Assume that many others share your dreams.

Be brave enough to start a conversation that matters.'

Dr Margaret J. Wheatley, from her book: Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future