



LIBRARIES
TRANSFORMING
COMMUNITIES

THEMING AND USING PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE WORKBOOK

ABOUT THE INITIATIVE

About Libraries Transforming Communities

Libraries Transforming Communities (LTC) is an ALA initiative that seeks to strengthen libraries' roles as core community leaders and change-agents. LTC addresses a critical need within the library field by developing and distributing new tools, resources, and support for library professionals to engage with their communities in new ways. As a result, we believe libraries will become more reflective of and connected to their communities and build stronger partnerships with local civic agencies, nonprofits, funders, and corporations. The initiative is made possible through a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

About the American Library Association

The American Library Association is the oldest and largest library association in the world, with approximately 58,000 members in academic, public, school, government, and special libraries. The mission of the American Library Association is to provide leadership for the development, promotion, and improvement of library and information services and the profession of librarianship in order to enhance learning and ensure access to information for all.

About the Harwood Institute

The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation is a nonprofit that teaches and coaches people and organizations to solve pressing problems and to change how their communities work together. Based on more than 25 years of innovating with communities, The Harwood Institute has developed a proven practice used in thousands of communities nationally and worldwide.

PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE

The Value of Public Knowledge

- Roots your work and decisions in what matters to people.
- Identifies key issues and their connections in language that people use.
- Uncovers a sense of common purpose.
- Enables you to set realistic goals.
- Informs your choices so your work is more relevant and has greater impact.
- In most communities, few leaders or organizations HAVE Public Knowledge.
- Too often we substitute Expert Knowledge for Public Knowledge.

Public Knowledge	Expert Knowledge
Comes from engaging with people around their aspirations, their concerns, how they see their community.	Comes from professional analysis and reporting of statistics, trend data, poll data, market and audience studies.
In plain language that everyone can understand.	Often in language that only professionals understand.

Notes

THEMING COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

Step 1: Organizing Your Notes

In this step you are organizing your notes to make it easier to identify themes and patterns.

1) Organize your notes from individual conversations under the following six categories:

- Aspirations
- Main concerns
- Specific issue concerns
- Actions that would make a difference
- Whom do people trust to act
- Questions people have

2) Combine notes from different conversations and organize them under the same six categories.

TIP: Start with notes from at least three conversations.

Step 2: Identifying Themes and a Story

In this step you are:

- Helping people involved in running Community Conversations gather Public Knowledge.
- Using questions to find meaning and get to the essence of what people are saying.
- Trying out themes together.
- Looking to see how those themes combine into a story or stories.

1) Meet to theme

- Hold a meeting with people who have been part of running the conversations.
- Give everyone copies of the combined notes you created at the end of Step 1.
- Set clear expectations; explain that the goal is to identify themes and what you're learning.
- Go over the ground rules:
 - » Start with what you can agree upon and build momentum.
 - » Don't debate language—discuss meaning.
 - » Ask questions to gain clarity and understanding instead of arguing a point.
 - » Keep the themes loose at first—only narrow as you go.

THEMING COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

2) Identify themes

During the meeting, ask questions like these to help you identify themes emerging from the conversation:

- Looking at the groupings, what do you see?
- What are people trying to say?
- How do the ideas and concepts fit together?

3) See how the themes fit together

After discussing emerging themes:

- See how the themes you identified fit together. The key is to think about:
 - » What's the story here?
 - » What's going on?
 - » How do these things fit together? And where don't they seem to fit?
- Work together; try out different stories to describe what's going on.

TIPS:

- Don't look for perfection, look for meaning.
- No story will explain everything.
- "Play" with the themes; try different ways of fitting things together.
- If some themes don't fit, that's fine; make note of these but don't get stuck.

4) Try out your stories

One way to test your themes and story is this "Community Narrative Template."

- People want _____ (aspirations).
- But they're concerned that _____ (main concerns).
- As people talk more about those concerns, they talk about _____ (specific issue(s)).
- They say that we need to focus on _____ (actions).
- And if _____ (groups) played a part in those actions, folks would be more likely trust the effort and step forward.

BEING A STEWARD OF PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE

What They Are

Various definitions of stewardship include descriptions like: “the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one’s care,” and “an ethic that embodies the responsible planning and management of resources.” Stewardship carries an ethical responsibility and is linked to the principle of sustainability.

Stewards of Public Knowledge are people and organizations that gather, share, and use the knowledge gained from Community Conversations in a way that contributes to the common good.

Essential and Practical Ideas

People enter into Community Conversations in good faith and see you as a trusted convener. To maintain and build that trust, give attention to the following essential ideas:

- **Stewardship rather than ownership and control:** People share very personal information with the expectation that you will use it to improve conditions in the community. While you do have a responsibility to protect people’s privacy, you cannot withhold the Public Knowledge gained for your exclusive use. (Note on privacy: Theming Community Conversations lifts up the essence of what people are saying without singling out a specific individual.)
- **Follow-up with participants:** This is one of the simplest but most often overlooked steps in hosting Community Conversations. People don’t expect to know what you will do with the information right away. They do appreciate knowing that you listened and they were heard. (See Community Conversation Workbook for a sample email.)
- **Use Public Knowledge sensitively:** Moving from raw conversation notes to a Community Narrative provides different levels of detail and specificity. Be really clear about your audience and the level and types of detail that they will benefit from having. For example, you may want to share specific details with an elected official in a one-on-one session while your newsletter shares the essence of the same information. (Note on language: This is obviously an art rather than a science. It is important not to sugarcoat difficult information or people will not trust your stewardship.)
- **Be creative about sharing:** The more ways you can get Public Knowledge in circulation, the more people you will engage in the action that leads to change in the community. Post it publicly in your reception area; include it in meetings wherever you go; ask partners to spread it in their networks; and use different kinds of media.

USING PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE

Public Knowledge can be applied to all aspects of your work:

- Engaging the community and creating new relationships
- Finding new partners and focusing the work with existing partners
- Developing strategies that more effectively create impact
- Mobilizing resources and creating new capacity in the community to work effectively together

Step 1: Getting the “Right” People

In this step you are identifying who to share Public Knowledge with and the level and types of detail they will benefit from having.

TIPS:

- **Start within your organization:** Begin with volunteer and staff decision-makers from across departments and functions. The important thing for this audience is being able to apply the Public Knowledge as they think about the implications for communication, working with partners, strategy, and resource development in addition to programs.
- **Look to partners:** Once you are confident your own organization will use Public Knowledge, start sharing it with key partners, especially if some of the information would be sensitive in the public space.
- **Broader Community:** Move as quickly as you possibly can to share Public Knowledge broadly throughout the community. Be proactive about sharing with informal as well as formal networks.

Step 2: Creating the “Right” Space

In this step you are ensuring that the meeting is set up so that participants can quickly get to a meaningful discussion about learning and applying Public Knowledge.

TIPS:

- **Safe space:** Use the same Ground Rules that you did in Community Conversations.

USING PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE

- **Sharing what you learned and the importance of this learning:**
 - » Have Community Narrative(s) available but not circulated in advance. (These are open to interpretation, which can sidetrack the meeting.) Verbally supplement Community Narrative(s) with quotes and examples that illustrate the Community Narrative points.
 - » Stay focused on what you learned and the importance of this learning from the conversation team's perspective. Be disciplined about sharing the narrative, not the details. You are trying to create shared meaning. DO NOT go into process details (how many conversations, how they are run, etc.).
 - » A typical meeting will last 60–90 minutes with two-thirds of the time spent on implications and takeaways.

Step 3: Shared Meaning and Implications

In this step you are working with others to move from understanding Public Knowledge to applying it (i.e., taking action).

TIPS:

- **Shared meaning and implications:** Ask participants the following questions in order. These questions are designed to build on the conversation team's understanding to create a wider circle of shared meaning. The goal is for everyone to make better informed decisions and take action together.
 - » What do you make of what we are learning?
 - » What are the implications for our work?
 - » Where could we use what we are learning?
 - » What are the possibilities for moving ahead?
- **Takeaways that prepare you for action:** Ask participants the following questions:
 - » Who else needs to know about what we are learning? (Be strategic here—not everyone who would have an interest, but those who can get action underway.)
 - » How can we apply what we are learning to our work?
 - » Where can we best get started? (Resist the temptation to try to do everything at once!)

COMMUNITY CONVERSATION STRATEGY

There are three basic variables to consider when holding a conversation:

Who is in the room?

Are you hoping to get a mix of people from different groups within the community, or are you trying to reach a specific group of people—immigrants, faith leaders, teachers, parents, etc.?

Where are people from?

Are you looking to engage people from across the community or from a specific neighborhood?

What are you discussing?

Is this a general Community Conversation, or are you looking to learn more about a topic/issue?

These three strategic variables make up a “broad vs. deep” tension that you need to manage in relationship to the work you are doing as an organization.

- You want to be well-grounded in the aspirations of the broad community before you engage in issue-specific conversations.
- You want to ground participants at the beginning of the deep conversations with the broad community aspirations, especially if they have not participated in a general Community Conversation.
- Keep asking yourself what work you want these conversations to do:
 - » Do you want the conversation to increase your Public Knowledge? To be an engagement tool?
 - » How can further conversations help the community move toward its aspirations?
 - » Given your organization’s aspirations for the community (the work you’re doing), where should you hold additional conversations? Why?

