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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Constructive discussion: conceptualising a framework for productive communication across personal, conversational, institutional and cultural spheres

Luis Hernando Lozano Paredes, LuisHernando.LozanoParedes@uts.edu.au
Chris Riedy, christopher.riedy@uts.edu.au
Alex Baumber, alex.baumber@uts.edu.au
Helena Robinson, helena.robinson@uts.edu.au
Fanny Salignac, fanny.salignac@uts.edu.au
Scott Matter, scott.matter@uts.edu.au
University of Technology Sydney, Australia

Chloë Spackman, chloe@next25.org.au
Stephanie Mason, steph@next25.org.au
Next25, Australia

Monique Potts, monique.potts@uts.edu.au
Samuel Wearne, samuel.wearne@uts.edu.au
University of Technology Sydney, Australia

Increased polarisation and unwillingness to engage with difference create obstacles to addressing complex societal challenges. This can be observed across numerous countries in relation to controversial issues such as climate change, immigration, inequality, housing affordability and racial justice. In this article, we explore the potential for 'constructive discussion' to help address these societal challenges. Constructive discussion emphasises a need for diverse perspectives to be raised and exchanged in a manner that enables reflection and practical decision making. Similarly, in order to define and conceptualise what constructive discussion means, a transdisciplinary approach is required to ensure that diverse perspectives, concepts and knowledge bases are included.

This article presents a holistic framework for understanding, identifying and applying constructive discussion strategies in a way that acknowledges the multiple contexts and scales at which the concept can be applied. The proposed framework features four nested spheres: personal, conversational, institutional and cultural. Within and across the spheres, a range of relevant concepts can be drawn upon to enable constructive discussion, including reflexivity,

transformative learning, deliberative democracy and appreciative inquiry, to name a few. By reviewing these concepts as a transdisciplinary team and integrating them into the proposed framework, we demonstrate how others may apply the framework in future to enhance constructive discussion in diverse contexts.

Keywords democracy • decision making • pluralism • transdisciplinary • societal communication

Key messages

- Constructive discussion involves diverse actors sharing perspectives in a manner that enables productive and beneficial decision making.
- Constructive discussion involves four interrelated spheres: personal, conversational, institutional and cultural.
- A wide range of existing concepts and frameworks offer practical insights that could inform interventions towards constructive discussion.
- No intervention is likely to reside within a single sphere and the use of our framework may help to overcome biases towards particular spheres.

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Introduction

In today's world, rife with complex social and political challenges, the need for robust and effective communication strategies is paramount. At the global scale, the emergence of populist movements in several Western countries signals a disconnect between the priorities of political classes and the citizenry, while fractious, insulated and often polarised arguments have hollowed out the centre in the left-to-right political spectrum (Lee, 2020; Pausch, 2021; Ross Arguedas et al, 2022; Borbáth et al, 2023). On complex and contested issues such as race, identity, gender, immigration and equality, robust and constructive engagement with others can be hampered by an unwillingness to acknowledge the presence of uncertainty and to treat those who disagree as ignorant or hateful (Redstone, 2022). The repercussions of these societal divisions are manifold, including the erosion of trust in institutions, the disintegration of civil discourse and the emergence of 'cancel culture'. Collectively, these dynamics not only undermine the fabric of democracy but also threaten its very foundation by challenging the premise that diverse voices can coexist within a democratic framework.

The academic response to these issues is varied, highlighting how government action, institutional reform, citizen participation and social activism can influence these challenges (Axelrod et al, 2021; McCoy and Somer, 2021; Sharp, 2022). Despite the breadth of research fields with interest in effective societal communication, there is a noticeable shortfall in applying practical methods for enabling productive

and solution-oriented dialogues to support societal problem-solving. Applying a transdisciplinary approach to these challenges offers the potential to create socially robust knowledge based on learning across and between diverse fields of research and practice (Polk, 2014). Finding practical ways to support constructive discussion of global social challenges is essential to make progress on the vexed, conflictual issues that are the focus of this journal.

Against this backdrop, this article explores 'constructive discussion' (CD) as a conceptual framework for guiding actions and enhancing communication efficacy to deal with emergent societal issues. Our conceptualisation of CD is inspired by the work of Next25, an Australian think-and-do tank. Next25 has a mission to 'ensure Australia has what it takes to make the future its people want' (Next25, 2025). It has been investigating ways to enhance the capacity of Australians to talk constructively about contentious issues since 2022, including by attempting to define CD (Fuller and Cheung, 2022). This article is the result of a collaboration between two researchers from Next25 and eight researchers from the University of Technology Sydney.

Australia faces its unique set of social challenges, including redressing the historical and ongoing impacts of colonisation on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, addressing the impacts of an ageing population, managing immigration, providing affordable housing and striking a balance between economic growth and environmental preservation. As in other countries, political polarisation and power disparity reduced the capacity for civil discussion and debate around issues such as climate change (Tranter, 2013; Boss et al, 2023), immigration (Grasso, 2020), same-sex marriage (Gleeson and Poulos, 2024), Indigenous rights (Bliuc et al, 2020) and housing affordability (Bangura and Lee, 2019).

The term 'constructive discussion' has previously been applied to various fields and contexts. Veerman (2003) use it to describe collaborative learning among students, where argumentation is deliberately incorporated into classroom activities to articulate and negotiate alternate perspectives. Used in this way, CD overlaps with concepts such as 'cognitive conflict' in teamwork (Amason et al, 1995) and 'constructive conflict' in innovation practice (Wan et al, 2021), as well as 'constructive controversy' (Johnson and Johnson, 2014) or 'conflict dialogue' in educational settings (Bickmore and Parker, 2014). CD has also been applied in team settings to enable better performance than individual workers could achieve alone (Niculae and Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil, 2016). In relation to international development, it has been framed as a way of untangling confusion around contested concepts and enhancing pragmatic cooperation (Jackson, 2012).

Our starting point for this article is Next25's definition of CD, which draws on interviews with 50 established and emerging leaders. Next25 defined CD as 'communication that is of useful and beneficial purpose, creating an environment where decision making better reflects the shared view of the public interest with respect to the common good' (Fuller and Cheung, 2022: 7). Further, CD is 'a communicative activity and process where people have the space and opportunity to share perspectives and explore difference in a reflexive, productive manner' (Reddan, 2023: 11). The first quotation highlights the 'constructive' element of CD, echoing Jackson's (2012) view of CD as addressing societal challenges in a 'pragmatic' manner. In contrast, the second quotation focuses less on decision making and more on exploring differences of opinion and practising reflexivity to unpack underlying values, beliefs and norms (Marg and Theiler, 2023).

The framing of CD around decision making connects it to various debates and conceptualisations about how democracies function or ought to function. This includes institutional processes that seek to overcome polarisation, such as 'deliberative democracy' (Bächtiger et al, 2018), as well as measures designed to influence policy making, such as 'constructive journalism' (CI, nd). Conversely, focusing more on the surfacing and unpacking of different opinions connects CD with concepts such as 'agonistic pluralism', which values the productive tension created when different views can be held and exchanged in opposition (Mouffe, 1999), and the related term 'constructive discourse' that has been applied in fields such as economics (Boettke, 2011) and appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider and Avital, 2004).

The central aim of this article is to synthesise a holistic framework for understanding, identifying and applying CD strategies, acknowledging the multidimensional contexts and scales at which CD can be instantiated. Utilising a comprehensive and targeted transdisciplinary narrative literature review process, this inquiry seeks to unearth potential synergies in how existing concepts, frameworks and methodologies from diverse fields, including communication, sociology, education, health and political science, overlap and engage with CD, and what practical insights and intervention strategies they might offer for enabling CD in different contexts where it may be lacking.

In this article, we first outline four 'spheres' where CD may be enabled: personal, conversational, institutional and cultural (detailed in the following section). These spheres are then used to structure the review of relevant concepts, frameworks and methodologies to identify practical insights and intervention strategies for enabling CD. This is followed by a discussion of the potential applications of the four-sphere framework for enabling CD in diverse contexts.

Four spheres of constructive discussion

Our ultimate objective in exploring the concept of CD is to find practical ways to intervene to foster and strengthen such discussion. We contend that supporting CD can help to address many of the overlapping ecological and social challenges we currently face. Potential leverage points and interventions enabling CD exist within various spheres, characterised by different types and scales of societal interaction. Depending on the context and the barriers that exist, CD may be enhanced by increasing an individual's capacity to approach discussions constructively, shaping the way conversations take place in groups, experimenting with the institutional arrangements that govern these conversations, and/or changing the social norms and narratives that shape a community's shared assumptions and world views.

To identify and categorise appropriate intervention strategies for enabling CD, we developed a conceptual framework consisting of four spheres: personal, conversational, institutional and cultural. These spheres emerged from an initial workshop in which the authors shared frameworks, concepts and methods with the potential to support CD. We recognised that these frameworks, concepts and methods differed in the scale they sought to influence; some aim to build individual capacity for CD (personal), others to influence conversations in small groups (conversational), and others to shift institutions or cultural narratives to shape CD at larger scales. We conceive of these scales as spheres, having a concentric relationship (Figure 1), in the sense that the cultures we are embedded in shape our institutions, our conversations and our

personal values. However, this relationship is not unidirectional. Shifts in personal values flow out to influence conversations, institutions and, ultimately, our cultures. Here, our thinking is aligned with Anthony Giddens theory of structuration (Giddens, 1984), where actors constantly create and reproduce culture, which in turn shapes their practices.

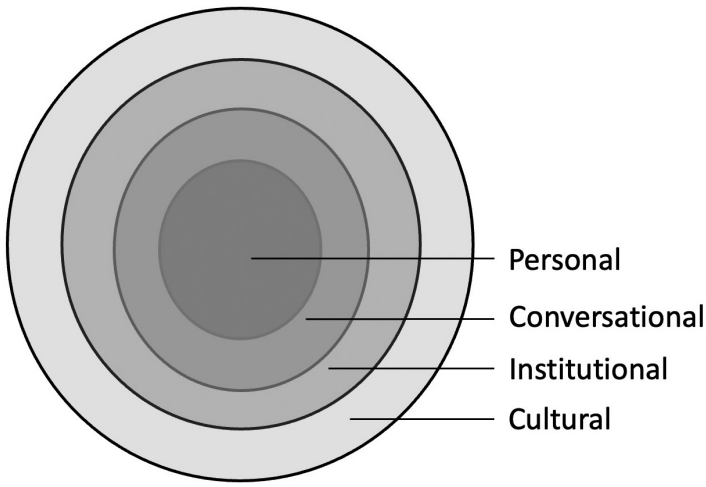
It is also important to note that most interventions cannot be neatly categorised within a single sphere. Most actions to improve CD target multiple spheres or have flow-on effects that can be mapped across multiple spheres. Categorising possible interventions according to the primary sphere they address was nevertheless valuable as a way of checking that we considered diverse options for improving CD. We now further define each sphere.

Personal

The personal sphere includes interventions that seek to build the capacity of individuals to engage in CD. These interventions facilitate inner development, transforming 'individual and collective mindsets, values, beliefs, world views and associated cognitive, emotional and relational abilities and capacities' (Ives et al, 2023: 2778). The core theory of change is that these inner changes will support the individual to behave differently and more constructively in all of their conversations and other interactions.

Most prominent in this sphere are learning interventions – for example, efforts to improve critical thinking skills, develop empathy for others, increase media literacy or build tolerance for diverse perspectives. While interventions in this sphere usually target many people simultaneously, they aim to trigger individual inner development. A useful related framework for categorising interventions in this sphere is the Inner Development Goals (IDGs) Framework. The IDGs seek to develop 23 individual skills across five dimensions: being, thinking, relating, collaborating and acting. Many of these skills are highly relevant to supporting CD, such as an openness and learning mindset, critical thinking, humility and trust (Inner Development Goals, nd).

Figure 1: The four spheres of the conceptual framework represented in two-dimensional form as concentric circles



Conversational

The next sphere captures interventions that shape, structure or scaffold conversations between individuals to make CD within specific groups more likely. For example, this might include interventions that establish rules of engagement, listening practices or conversational norms for meetings, communities of practice or online discussion forums (Wenger et al, 2002; Kaner, 2014). The boundary between conversational and institutional or cultural interventions can be fuzzy but delineated in three ways. First, conversations involve exchanges where the number of participants is bounded. The ability to genuinely converse with one another becomes more constrained as the number of participants increases. Second, conversations imply situations where participant interaction is possible; this is not true in some online forums and public consultation processes. Finally, conversations are usually bounded in time rather than the continuing discussion inside organisations and the public sphere. Institutional and cultural interventions become more relevant when these three conditions are unmet.

Meeting and workshop facilitators typically have a toolkit of conversational interventions that they draw on, including check-in and check-out processes, icebreaker activities, turn-taking rules, use of specific language and framing, and ways of managing people with different learning styles and personalities (Kaner, 2014). Examples include the non-hierarchical circle structure used in Indigenous yarning (Bessarab and Ng'andu, 2010), the use of role-modelling within non-violent communication (NVC; Chen et al, 2015), and assigning participants roles to enhance listening (De Wever et al, 2010).

Institutional

Whereas conversational interventions focus on relationships in small, often temporary groups, institutional interventions seek to transform established institutional structures to support CD. Institutions 'comprise regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive elements that, together with associated activities and resources, provide stability and meaning to social life' (Scott, 2013: 55). In the context of CD, particularly important institutions include the decision-making institutions of democracy, such as parliaments and their associated bureaucracies, media institutions that provide the communicative infrastructure for public debate, and educational institutions that teach the skills and norms needed to engage in CD.

Institutional interventions aim to shape many conversations in many groups rather than single conversations within a specific group. Of course, as already discussed, these boundaries are not firm. For example, citizen assemblies are an attempt to intervene in democratic decision-making institutions to give citizens a greater say on specific issues (Lacelle-Webster and Warren, 2021). Establishing these as a routine part of our democracy would be an institutional intervention to support CD on matters of policy. However, citizen assemblies also draw on deliberative democratic theory to derive norms about how conversations within an assembly should be conducted; application of these norms is a conversational sphere intervention in our model. Such norms can be adopted by groups even if institutions do not change (Landwehr, 2014).

Cultural

Finally, we recognise an even more expansive cultural sphere of interventions where the aim is to shift cultural myths, imaginaries, discourses and narratives to favour CD.

Here, we recognise that there are prevailing cultural elements that currently work against CD. For example, the dominant economic discourse of neoliberal capitalism prioritises competition and self-interest over collaboration, and values economic growth over ecological integrity and social justice (Bregman, 2020; Riedy, 2020). This competitive discourse shapes our institutions, supporting an oppositional environment in our parliaments and media debates. Lakoff and Johnson (2008) show that this discourse subtly shapes the way we talk about concepts relevant to CD, giving examples of the many metaphors that equate argument with war. They ask what our culture would look like if we viewed argument (and discussion) as a dance instead of a battle.

Interventions within the cultural spheres are arguably the most difficult, but there is potential to propagate or amplify new narratives that are more consistent with CD, such as by drawing attention to positive stories of collaboration and using framing to popularise new terms. A tangible example is the publication of refugee stories by the Refugee Council of Australia,[1] which sought to humanise refugees and combat polarising narratives about the threats refugees pose to the Australian way of life. In time, this may contribute to greater cultural tolerance of refugees, creating opportunities for more CDs around refugee policy.

These four spheres are used later in this article to structure a review of diverse concepts, theories and frameworks relevant to the promotion of CD. The next section summarises the methods used for the review.

Methodology

This research involved a transdisciplinary group of scholars with backgrounds in different disciplines employing a narrative literature review methodology to explore the broad, multidimensional and evolving aspects of CD across various domains (Byrne, 2016). This study builds on earlier work by Next25 with societal leaders to explore the practical needs for CD in policy and community settings (Fuller and Cheung, 2021). While the literature review was carried out by academic researchers, Next25's applied approach grounded the study in real-world concerns, ensuring its relevance to pressing societal challenges.

The transdisciplinary narrative literature review involved analysing relevant literature from multiple disciplines and also integrating the findings into a cohesive narrative with potential normative outcomes. A narrative review approach was selected over a systematic review approach due to the tendency for the latter to be narrower in scope (Byrne, 2016). Narrative reviews are particularly effective at addressing multifaceted issues that span different fields of study, allowing researchers to draw broader, more insightful conclusions that transcend the boundaries of individual disciplines (McGregor, 2017).

We opted for a narrative review rather than a systematic one because it allowed us to weave together diverse literature spanning multiple disciplines (for example, sociology, education, political science) and practice areas (such as conflict resolution and policy making). Systematic reviews rely on strict inclusion/exclusion criteria, which can be limiting, whereas our approach was designed to foster transdisciplinary synthesis through:

1. iterative scoping workshops to map connections across fields, which led to the emergence of a four-sphere framework (personal, conversational, institutional, cultural) for categorising CD interventions;
2. thematic clustering using the four-sphere framework; and
3. critical reflection to balance theoretical depth with practical applicability.

While this approach carries a risk of selection bias, it also allowed for a more integrative perspective – bringing together different methodologies and insights from academic research and practice, which rigid methodologies might have overlooked.

To harness the team's diverse disciplinary expertise and guide our collaboration, we organised an initial workshop involving the ten authors of this article to align our understanding of CD and confirm the suitability of a transdisciplinary narrative literature review as our methodology. This workshop provided a forum for discussing our backgrounds in sociology, political science, communication studies, cultural studies, anthropology, education and pedagogy, environmental management, urban studies, and psychology, recognising that our varied expertise would contribute to a comprehensive perspective on CD (Lang et al, 2012). It also allowed us to discuss our motivations, including a more sustainable world, social justice and the advancement of transdisciplinary approaches to research. An important outcome from this workshop was our recognition that the various frameworks, concepts and methodologies to support CD mentioned by the participating researchers could be categorised based on the scale of discussion each sought to influence. We conceptualised these scales as the four spheres already discussed – personal, conversational, institutional and cultural.

After the workshop, each member contributed additional frameworks, concepts and methodologies from their respective fields that they felt were relevant to the concept of CD. These were placed in a shared online repository, which enabled us to systematically compile and categorise scholarly works linked to the four spheres. To ensure focus and manage the scope of the review, we employed a collaborative filtering process, where the transdisciplinary team members voted on which frameworks merited deeper exploration based on their relevance and potential to enhance our understanding of CD. To maintain focus, the team applied three clear criteria:

1. relevance to barriers in CD – such as polarisation and reflexivity deficits;
2. demonstrated practical impact – supported by peer-reviewed studies or credible grey literature; and
3. cross-sphere applicability – ensuring solutions were not confined to isolated domains.

Concepts were included if they gained majority support from both academic and practitioner team members, striking a balance between scientific validity (theoretical grounding, for instance) and societal relevance (for example, scalability in policy contexts). This process allowed us to prioritise the most promising frameworks for analysis (Snyder, 2019).

Once the priority frameworks were selected, team members conducted detailed literature reviews, extracting key insights, practical applications and intervention strategies related to CD within the respective spheres. The findings were then discussed in a second workshop, where we collectively integrated them into the broader CD framework. During this session, we mapped each reviewed concept against the four-sphere framework, analysing how they intersected and complemented each other and where synergies, overlaps or gaps existed (Trochim and McLinden, 2017). This iterative process of discussion and reflection strengthened the framework, ensuring it was comprehensive, robust and grounded in diverse disciplinary insights. The resulting framework was designed to function as a living resource that practitioners and researchers of CD can continually expand, refine and tailor to specific needs.

Review of key concepts

The literature review and analysis presented here focus on key concepts, frameworks and bodies of literature relevant to each sphere of the conceptual framework. The attention given to different concepts and literature is proportional to their insights into designing potential interventions that could enhance CD. The structure of this review begins with the personal sphere and moves outwards to the cultural sphere. However, given that many of the concepts reviewed cut across more than one sphere (Table 1), the review structure is not strictly linear.

Table 1: Key concepts reviewed for this study (shading indicates the strength of relationships with each sphere of the constructive discussion framework)

	PERSONAL	CONVERSATIONAL	INSTITUTIONAL	CULTURAL
Reflexivity				
Empathy-building				
Transformative learning				
Non-violent communication				
Appreciative inquiry				
Four levels of listening				
Indigenous yarning				
Agonistic democracy				
Deliberative democracy				
Participatory futuring				
Narrative change				
Media theory				
Social licence to operate				

Personal sphere

Reflexivity is a skill that affects an individual's capacity to engage in CD at the personal level. We use the term reflexivity here, but other terms are also used in the literature, including self-awareness, critical thinking and critical reflection (Stibbe et al, 2020; Jordan et al, 2021). All of these terms refer to the ability to step back and critically reflect upon one's own thought process, values, prejudices and habitual action, which is a prerequisite to questioning and, if necessary, breaking away from existing paradigms and ways of doing things (Bentz and O'Brien, 2019). This, in turn, requires a mindset that is open to ambiguity and the questioning of personal beliefs and social norms, something that Redstone (2022) argues is crucial for overcoming the 'Certainty Trap' – a tendency to treat certain issues as settled or obvious that can stifle constructive engagement.

Reflexivity, as outlined by Yang (2015) and Martin (2006), goes beyond self-awareness, to actively involve individuals in reflecting on their roles and biases. This self-reflection – and the related concept of introspection (Kegan, 2009) – is crucial for CD, as it allows individuals to recognise and challenge their own preconceptions and how these are influenced by social, cultural and historical factors (Pels, 2000), the structural norms of their environments, such as gendered practices in professional settings (Adamson, 2014) and traditional research paradigms in organisational studies (Alvesson et al, 2008; Valentine, 2011). As a central element of transdisciplinary

practice (Baumber, 2022; Marg and Theiler, 2023), reflexivity is also crucial to developing a transdisciplinary notion of CD across and beyond the epistemological structures and methodological approaches of different scholarly fields.

Empathy is an important counterpart for reflexivity in CD as it involves understanding, feeling, and sharing the feelings and perspectives of another person (Eklund and Meranius, 2021), and ideally developing compassion for those whose perspective we learn to understand (Jordan et al, 2021). While spontaneous empathy is often biased towards people who are proximate, connected or similar to a person, a more reflective empathy is also possible when the empathiser actively reflects on their own biases and prejudices (Persson and Savulescu, 2018). Empathy may also be increased through targeted interventions that 'coach' individuals to consider other perspectives or shift mindsets and social norms (Weisz et al, 2021). While reflexivity and empathy primarily reside at the personal level of our framework, they may also be practised collectively and incorporated into other spheres of the framework through conversational strategies, institutional structures and approaches that enable cultural change.

Practical insights around enhancing reflexivity include Martin's (2006) recommendation that observing and reporting on cases where people non-reflexively 'practise gender' can help to challenge gendered practices and discourses in workplaces. Co-reflexivity may be achieved by sharing written reflections (Baumber et al, 2020) and design practices such as 'reframing' can be incorporated into institutional approaches to enhance reflexivity (Dorst, 2015). In relation to empathy-building, measures that involve coaching people to consider the perspectives of others have been shown to increase empathy in the short term within specific settings, while 'motivational' interventions that cross over into the cultural sphere by targeting mindsets or social norms may be able to achieve a longer-term impact (Weisz et al, 2021).

Empathy and reflexivity also play a role in transformative learning, which involves transforming an individual's beliefs about themselves and the world around them through critical assessment of received assumptions and underlying premises (Mezirow, 1991). This can be enabled by exposure to alternative viewpoints and experiences, as well as through 'consciously directed processes' that enable the critical analysis and reflection required to transform one's own assumptions and world views (Elias, 1997).

Transformative learning may offer particular value in settings such as higher education and leadership development, where it can encourage metacognition and the transformation of knowledge and skills into real-world applications (Ubaidah et al, 2019; Schnepfleitner and Ferreira, 2021). For example, Naranjo (2022) discusses how field-based art programming can facilitate transformative learning experiences in tertiary education by immersing participants in nature, art-making, community and place to create 'disorienting dilemmas'. However, while transformative learning has the potential to contribute to CD by enabling the changing of attitudes, beliefs and assumptions through critical reflection, this may not be required in all instances and Hoggan (2015) warns against the use of the term 'transformative learning' as a catch-all term for any instance of learning.

An additional approach that can support CD at the personal level is appreciative inquiry, which is a philosophy and method with roots in positive psychology that promotes transformational change by shifting from a problem-based orientation to a strength-based approach involving affirmation, appreciation and positive dialogue (Trajkovski et al, 2013). It aligns with the personal sphere of our framework because

it encourages a shift in individual mindsets while crossing over into the conversational and cultural sphere by fostering narrative change, positive storytelling and community acceptance. It has been applied to diverse settings to achieve goals such as enabling nursing care transitions (Scala and Costa, 2014), fostering a sense of community within higher education institutions (Rohmatussyifa and Utami, 2022), facilitating collaboration in national park management (Joyner et al, 2019), and enabling co-construction of knowledge in science education (Keys and Bryan, 2001).

Many practical insights from appreciative inquiry research cut across our framework's personal and conversational spheres. For example, Rohmatussyifa and Utami (2022) highlight the role of storytelling in drawing out the best aspects of a participant's experiences. Trajkovski et al (2013) discuss how group facilitation tools such as 'magic wand questions' (what would you create if you had a magic wand?) and 'provocative propositions' (confident statements of organisational goals) can be used to elicit positive visions of the future. Cooperrider et al (2008) present a practical framework for group settings that enables the articulation of participants' values, envisioning what might be, co-constructing preferred futures and identifying ways of sustaining them.

Self-worth is a critical factor that can impact an individual's capacity to participate in processes involving reflexivity, empathy, transformative learning or appreciative inquiry. Self-worth refers to an individual's perception of their own value and significance (Batchelder and Hagan, 2022), overlapping with related constructs such as self-esteem and generalised self-efficacy (Chang et al, 2011; Batchelder and Hagan, 2022). Self-worth is significant to the practice of CD by enabling individuals to express their thoughts and feelings with confidence, while also considering the perspectives of others (Batchelder and Hagan, 2022). Some of the concepts discussed for the conversational sphere in the following section, such as generative listening and NVC, can help to foster self-worth and an environment conducive to CDs, characterised by mutual respect, open-mindedness and a willingness to engage with diverse viewpoints.

Conversational sphere

All of the practices discussed so far have the potential to be used to structure conversations in ways that promote CD. For example, facilitators of a conversation can use guidelines and activities that encourage participants to engage with reflexivity, empathy and appreciation. Transformative learning, while referring to a personal transformation, often takes place in group settings, facilitated by exposure to other perspectives. In this section, we consider additional concepts and frameworks with the potential to guide conversations towards CD. As noted previously, meeting and workshop facilitators have a vast toolkit of conversational interventions that can support CD, from icebreakers and check-ins to help participants build trust with each other, to role-playing activities that encourage perspective-taking and practices for building supportive group norms (Kaner, 2014). Here we will focus on three available frameworks for supporting more constructive conversations: Non-violent Communication, the Four Levels of Listening, and Indigenous yarning.

Non-violent Communication, also referred to as Compassionate Communication, is a structured communication process first developed by Marshall Rosenberg in the 1960s (Rosenberg, 2015). Grounded in deep listening, NVC is intended to generate compassion and mutual understanding among participants in a situation, leading to de-escalation and conflict resolution. The NVC process involves stating and receiving

information that expresses four components: judgement-free observations, description of subjective feelings, acknowledgement of underlying needs, and requests for actions to address those needs. Rosenberg reports using NVC in mediation and conflict resolution over several decades of professional practice, including with families, in workplaces, between ethnic communities, and in the context of street and state violence. NVC has been incorporated and applied in a diverse array of domains, including communicating conservation science (Williams et al, 2021), promoting human–wildlife coexistence (Kansky and Maassarani, 2022), facilitating difficult conversations on contentious issues in college classrooms (Agnew, 2012; Koopman and Seliga, 2021) and in post-incarceration rehabilitation and substance abuse treatment programmes (Marlow et al, 2012).

The Four Levels of Listening feature in Otto Scharmer's Theory U framework (Scharmer, 2008). The first level, downloading, involves listening passively in a way that reconfirms habitual judgements. Factual listening (Level 2) involves listening for new information while avoiding judgement. In contrast, empathic listening (Level 3) focuses less on the facts and more on understanding how the other person feels (drawing on empathy skills related to the personal sphere). The fourth level of listening, generative listening, involves listening for emergent opportunities to shape the future and create something new. At Levels 3 and 4, participants let go of preconceptions and become open to new information, perspectives and possibilities. This kind of listening can support CD. Facilitators can guide participants in a conversation to move into these deeper levels of listening by creating activities where participants are asked to become mindful of how they are listening and experiment with listening in deeper ways. For example, De Wever et al (2010) highlights how listening can be enhanced by assigning participants roles such as summariser and source searcher.

Indigenous yarning (in the context of Australian Indigenous peoples) involves storytelling and conversation to communicate and transfer history and knowledge, and is a culturally appropriate method within Indigenous communities (Bessarab and Ng'andu, 2010). A practical approach used in Indigenous yarning is the circle structure, which creates a physical space for the conversation that reduces hierarchy and introduces norms that encourage all to listen, participate and collaborate on issues and solutions. It has been recognised for decolonising qualitative research (Kennedy et al, 2022) and affirming the Indigenous construction of knowledge (Byrne et al, 2021). Yarning has been used as a method by non-Indigenous researchers and health workers in healthcare settings within Aboriginal communities to create spaces for relational dialogue and narrative and might involve opening a healthcare conversation or interview with establishing shared friendships or acquaintances, connections to Country or local events (Bessarab and Ng'andu, 2010; Byrne et al, 2021). Approaches to using this method for CD need to be negotiated with local Indigenous communities, Elders and knowledge holders who can advise on appropriate set-up of space, relationships and protocols (Bessarab and Ng'andu, 2010; Byrne et al, 2021).

Institutional sphere

Interventions in the institutional sphere seek to change institutional rules, practices and narratives to create supportive conditions for CD. As such, frameworks of particular relevance propose different approaches to governance and decision making, such as theories of deliberative democracy, agonistic democracy and practices of participatory futuring.

Deliberative democracy is a theory and practice that emphasises the importance of public deliberation in democratic decision-making processes. Deliberation is a form of communication that involves careful collective consideration of a topic through 'processes of judgment and preference formation and transformation within informed, respectful, and competent dialogue' (Dryzek, 2010: 3). As such, deliberation has much in common with our definition of CD. Proponents of deliberative democracy aim to enhance the quality of democratic outcomes by promoting informed and inclusive dialogue among citizens that prioritises fairness, educative potential, community-generating power, epistemic quality of outcomes, and congruence between the ideal of politics and the values of the community (Cooke, 2000). While proponents of deliberative democracy ultimately seek to establish entire deliberative governance systems (Parkinson and Mansbridge, 2012), most of the progress to date in promoting deliberation has been through specific, often temporary, forums such as citizen juries and assemblies and deliberative polls (Bächtiger et al, 2018). Facilitators of such forums have developed deep practical expertise in facilitating specific groups in ways that promote deliberation (White et al, 2022), which is relevant to our previous discussion of the conversational sphere.

Deliberative democracy has been recognised for its potential to bridge the gap between citizens and government in public administration and has also been explored in other domains, such as corporate social responsibility (Gilbert et al, 2023) and education (Nishiyama, 2019). Implementation challenges include time pressures, financial motivations, entrenched professional interests, informational imbalance, practical feasibility and cost (Safaei, 2015). The success of participatory and deliberative processes hinges on navigating these challenges, and ensuring that dialogue remains inclusive, equitable and constructive.

Regarding practical insights for enabling CD, research into deliberative democracy by Dryzek (2005) on divided societies and Chirawurah et al (2019) on Ghana has emphasised the important role of rational, inclusive debates in decision making. Boswell (2012) highlights the important role of narratives in shaping public deliberation, while Mao et al (2021) emphasises the role of individual psychological factors in motivating public participation in relation to 'waste-free cities'. Governance practices such as mini-publics and online deliberation can enhance the theoretical understanding and practical application of deliberative democracy in different contexts and help to overcome barriers (Gilbert et al, 2023).

Agonistic democracy is an alternative democratic theory that views politics as inherently conflictual and aims not to eliminate conflict, but rather to engage it constructively and inclusively (Laclau, 2018). Mouffe (2005) further develops this concept by arguing that democratic politics should be based on recognising the existence of multiple and conflicting interests and identities. As such, agonistic democracy cuts across the conversational and institutional spheres of our CD framework by engaging people in dialogue and debate that allows for expressing different perspectives and negotiating conflicting interests (Bond, 2011) within an open and inclusive political space (Schaap, 2006). This aligns with the broader concept of pluralism (Smith et al, 2021) and arguably contrasts with the emphasis on rational consensus-building in deliberative democracy (Gürsözlü, 2009). From this perspective, complete and permanent agreement is never achieved, and the goal instead is to negotiate ever-present discord by finding 'partial political settlements' that divided actors can accept (Patterson et al, 2024). In workplace settings, cooperative conflict

of this nature has been shown to improve team performance, while competitive conflict does the reverse (Boon et al, 2013).

Practical interventions that may be able to enhance agonistic democracy include the creation of neutral public spaces for social cohesion and the promotion of democratic values, such as public libraries (Eckerdal, 2018; Carlsson et al, 2023). Maddison (2014) highlights the need for facilitation in agonistic dialogue to ensure that the level of structure is appropriate, while Bohm (1996) warns that dialogue aimed at making decisions or reaching conclusions can be inherently limiting.

Moving beyond alternative democratic theories, practices such as participatory futuring can help to promote CD in diverse governance systems. Participatory futuring (or foresight) involves engagement with diverse stakeholders to anticipate, plan and shape possible futures (Nikolova, 2014; Neuhoff et al, 2023; Barendregt et al, 2024). It can take many forms, including expert-driven scenario-building, multistakeholder engagement to influence policy agendas, and social learning processes aimed at building public futures literacy (Neuhoff et al, 2023). While questions continue to be asked around how to enhance inclusivity and empowerment in this emerging field (Barendregt et al, 2024), participatory futuring aims to broaden access to futuring processes, move away from top-down planning and generate more reliable information on which to take action (Neuhoff et al, 2023). Participatory futuring, along with deliberative democracy and agonistic democracy, incorporates the principle of empowered participation, which emphasises inclusion and agency of diverse stakeholders (Beauvais and Warren, 2018).

Participatory futuring offers a range of techniques including interviews and focus groups, modelling, backcasting, visualisation, arts-based techniques, visioning workshops, storytelling, and embodiment (Neuhoff et al, 2023). Participatory modelling involves engaging stakeholders to create shared representations of reality and has been particularly applied in environmental resource management contexts (Jordan et al, 2018). Participatory art can also be a powerful tool for envisioning possible futures and empowering social change, as shown by Mkwananzi et al (2021), to elicit aspirations among rural youth in Zimbabwe.

Cutting across these democratic and participatory approaches is the need for increased civic engagement also to foster CD at the institutional level. Research by Malin et al (2015) and Ekman and Amnå (2012) into civic participation shows that the cultivation of civic skills, neighbourhood connection and a sense of civic duty can foster civic engagement and political participation. There is also growing interest and experience with the democratisation of knowledge generation through co-production practices (Du et al, 2021). Involving citizens in knowledge generation can lead to greater acceptance of findings, which can support CD.

Cultural sphere

While all of the concepts discussed have the potential to influence culture by promoting specific meanings, norms and narratives, some additional concepts with relevance to the cultural sphere include narrative change, media theory and social licence to operate.

Our cultures are characterised by dominant discourses and narratives that work against CD, such as economic discourses that promote competition and individualism (Riedy, 2020). Narrative change initiatives seek to intervene in the cultural sphere

and promote new personal and collective meanings and narratives through practices such as storytelling to construct new narratives and critical deconstruction of existing narratives (Riedy, 2022). New narratives have the potential to support CD, for example by promoting an understanding of humans as collaborative rather than only competitive (Bregman, 2020). Narrative change has relevance across all spheres. For example, in policy reform, as discussed by Asquer (2014) and Sonenshein (2010), narrative change is pivotal to influencing the implementation of strategic changes within organisations and institutions. Further, Mendes et al (2010) explore the role of narrative in therapeutic contexts, where the emergence of new self-narratives can catalyse personal transformation.

Experience with narrative change points to practical techniques that could facilitate CD. Uncovering dominant narratives through narrative analysis can be an important first step in challenging them and developing new narratives (McBeth et al, 2007). Narrative analysis can be undertaken in a participatory manner, including through interviews, workshops and the co-construction of new narratives, including forms such as poetry (Dill, 2015). Narrative dissidence can challenge dominant narratives, such as creating 'spoof' videos in China (Li, 2016). In relation to individual narrative change in therapeutic settings, the identification of 'innovative moments' involving new experiences and reconceptualisation can help to form new narratives (Matos et al, 2009). Personal identity also represents a form of narrative that can be analysed and challenged by engaging in reflexivity (Hammack, 2008). Promoting narratives of cooperation, respect and humility across all spheres can support CD.

As media is arguably the most important influence on cultural narratives, media theory and research into the impact of social media on trust and societal fabric also provide insights into the cultivation of CD. The increasing commercialisation of media and the rise of social media has seen a growing focus on divisive and conflictual stories that pander to niche audiences and fuel societal polarisation (McChesney, 2004; Kubin and von Sikorski, 2021). In this context, studies by Van Audenhove et al (2018) and Ashley et al (2017) stress the importance of equipping individuals with the skills to critically evaluate information in the digital age, a cornerstone for engaging in constructive dialogues. For example, the Australian Media Literacy Alliance has developed a Media Literacy Framework that guides users to ask critical questions about the institutions responsible for producing an example of media, the intended audiences, how people, places and ideas are represented, whether data is being collected, the language used and the relationships generated.[2]

However, the influence of media and social media on societal fabric is multifaceted. Research by Guo et al (2021) and Sormanen and Dutton (2015) highlights the dual nature of social media's impact, showing both its potential to enhance knowledge acquisition and project performance, as well as its role in societal change. Barriers to CD in the digital realm include information overload and the framing of issues like the Ebola crisis (Pieri, 2018), which can have significant implications for the quality of public discourse and perceptions.

Social licence to operate has emerged in recent decades as a way of conceptualising community acceptance of new or proposed activities by assessing factors such as distributional fairness (how costs and benefits are shared), procedural fairness (how proponents interact with affected communities), confidence in governance, legitimacy, and trust (Baumber et al, 2019). Its relevance for CD may be greatest when contentious developments or practices have been proposed, for example when evaluating the

perceived distributional and procedural fairness of new developments involving mining, energy or emerging technologies (Boutilier and Thomson, 2011; Bice, 2014; Aitken et al, 2020). Practical interventions that have been shown to enhance trust and social licence include deliberately making and keeping small promises early on, responding in the community's interests when disruptions arise, and focusing on the quality rather than quantity of community consultation processes (Boutilier and Thomson, 2011; Baumber et al, 2019).

Towards a practical framework for constructive discussion

To foster CD around complex social issues and contexts, a practical framework is required that allows stakeholders to navigate approaches and design targeted interventions within or across the various spheres that influence communication. Our proposed framework enables public institutions, community groups, proponents of new activities, researchers and other stakeholders with an interest in CD to design interventions for the personal, conversational, institutional and cultural spheres by drawing on theoretical and practical insights that have previously been gained across a diversity of different disciplines and contexts (Table 2).

To apply the framework to specific real-world contexts, empirical research would first need to be undertaken to identify the particular barriers and leverage points relating to CD within each sphere. While various barriers to CD have been identified at national or global scales, including political polarisation (Borbáth et al, 2023), the rise of populism (Lee, 2020), 'echo chambers' (Ross Arguedas et al, 2022) and an unwillingness to embrace uncertainty (Redstone, 2022), these factors – and others – need to be explored within specific contexts to design effective interventions. Once these priority areas have been identified, the framework can review intervention strategies that have been applied elsewhere, explore innovative ways to adapt and combine such strategies and identify spheres that may have been overlooked. Contentious issues such as immigration and housing policy offer promising avenues to develop and test CD interventions that could help to overcome observed polarisation (Bangura and Lee, 2019; Grasso, 2020), as well as identify context-specific barriers to operationalising CD.

No real-world context involves barriers or leverage points that reside in only one sphere of the framework. Accordingly, no practical intervention to enable CD should operate within a single sphere either. Personal capabilities are critical for participants to engage effectively in institutional processes and recognise the cultural factors influencing

Table 2: Strategy for applying CD framework to specific contexts

Key questions that framework can be used to address	Ways of using the framework
What barriers and leverage points exist in relation to CD?	Explore each sphere to identify barriers and leverage points that exist at the personal, conversational, institutional and cultural levels.
What insights and intervention strategies are offered by relevant concepts?	Select concepts that are relevant to each sphere of interest (for example, deliberative democracy for the institutional sphere) and research insights and strategies that have been employed within each concept.
How might these be integrated, targeted and operationalised?	Design integrated interventions that draw on multiple concepts simultaneously to target leverage points across multiple spheres.

their world views (Pels, 2000; Kegan, 2009; Yang, 2015). Conversely, while some interventions may seek a cultural change in society, they are always expressed through personal, relational and institutional acts. As such, the framework represents more than just a simple 'toolkit' for practitioners to select from; instead, it is a structured approach to enabling constructive discussion that requires cross-level integration.

For example, a practitioner seeking to design an institutional process to enable CD may use the framework to identify the potential to use models based on deliberative democracy or participatory futuring. Furthermore, the interconnections between the institutional and conversational spheres revealed by the framework may lead them to incorporate facilitation approaches within their activities that draw on the principles of appreciative inquiry or NVC. This might lead, in turn, to an identification of the need for complementary activities that enhance the personal capabilities of participants around reflexivity and empathy. The focus on beliefs and norms within the personal sphere might then help the organisers to broaden their thinking to the cultural level and reflect on the ways that narratives and social imaginaries influence the world views of participants, which could, in turn, lead the practitioner to experiment with narrative change through approaches such as 'narrative dissidence' (Li, 2016).

By explicitly drawing attention to each of the spheres, the framework may help practitioners to question and overcome biases towards particular spheres. In our example, the practitioners in question may use the framework to ask themselves why they first gravitated towards the institutional sphere to look for decision-making processes such as deliberative democracy. While a focus on decision making may seem reasonable when seeking a form of CD that is 'useful' (Fuller and Cheung, 2022) or 'pragmatic' (Jackson, 2012), framing the overall purpose of a conversation around decision making can inhibit diverse views from being surfaced (Bohm, 1996). As such, our hypothetical practitioners may use the framework to challenge themselves to begin the design process in the personal or conversational spheres and use these results to select an appropriate institutional structure that ensures that diverse views are surfaced reflexively (Reddan, 2023).

While the framework helps users to explore diverse options and overcome their own 'Certainty Trap' (Redstone, 2022), it does not provide a definitive answer on how to strike an appropriate balance between the pursuit (and belief) in a shared objective and the need for critical debate. While CD requires some level of shared belief in the purpose of discussion, there is also a need for what Kagan (2011) terms 'cultures of complexity' that are capable and comfortable to sit with ambiguity – and the forums and practices that can build those competencies in individuals and institutions. Having shared and grand aspirations, but holding them loosely is reflected in Vermeulen and van den Akker's (2010) suggestion of an emerging age of 'metamodernism', whereby trends in contemporary art and culture reflect the growth of a collective appetite for normative change that goes beyond critique and combines grand narratives of modernity that provide hope and directionality, with the critical perspective of postmodernity, maintaining a collective culture of critical discussion.

Another significant barrier to be considered when seeking to engage in constructive discussion across diverse disciplines, epistemologies and world views is the challenge of building competence in transdisciplinary communication and collaboration. This competence in engaging in challenging conversations at the interfaces of disciplines, epistemologies and discourses is one that can be practised and learned but is not 'innate' for researchers and practitioners immersed in their individual disciplines.

Transdisciplinary research and practice teams invariably engage in a process where they are required to negotiate communication protocols, shared language and points of difference (Thompson, 2009; Hall and O'Rourke, 2014; O'Rourke et al, 2014). Research into the communication processes within transdisciplinary research teams has indicated challenges and barriers in teams where negative humour and sarcasm, competition for power, debating expertise and expressing boredom were present (Thompson, 2009). Conversely, spending time together, practising trust, negotiating meaning through discussing language differences and reflexive dialogue were found to enable more constructive collective conversations in transdisciplinary research teams (Thompson, 2009). Building communication skills and practice across disciplines and forms of knowledge requires an iterative process with capacity to navigate and integrate differences in epistemologies, language and priorities to find common ground (Thompson, 2009; O'Rourke et al, 2014).

The transdisciplinary nature of our research team was an essential element of our approach and resulted in diverse concepts, frameworks and bodies of literature being included in the framework. However, the concepts discussed here are not intended to provide an exhaustive list for framework users. Instead, our aim is to demonstrate how designers of CD processes could utilise the framework to identify barriers to achieving CD in a specific context, seek out tools and insights that could be used to overcome these barriers, and consciously explore the gaps and biases in their thinking about the personal, conversational, institutional or cultural spheres that affect communication. As Table 2 demonstrated earlier, the framework would be expanded over time through application to diverse contexts and by diverse research teams to incorporate additional concepts and insights from disciplines not represented within our research team (that is, beyond sociology, political science, communication studies, cultural studies, anthropology, environmental management, urban studies and psychology).

Implementing the framework in practice is not simply an academic exercise but requires a coordinated effort among governments, NGOs, community organisations and the private sector. It also necessitates flexible funding models that can support innovative pilot projects and scale successful interventions. Further partnerships will be critical to the framework's testing, evaluation and evolution. This requires the careful development of interventions to enable CD, real-world trials, and the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data on intervention outcomes.

Conclusion

The intricate tapestry of modern societal challenges, characterised by their complexity and interconnectedness, demands innovative approaches to dialogue and problem-solving. Through its extensive narrative literature review and transdisciplinary examination, this article has underscored the pivotal role of CD in navigating these challenges effectively. By embracing CD as a transformative concept, this study has ventured beyond traditional discourse paradigms to propose a comprehensive framework for fostering meaningful dialogue across personal, conversational, institutional and cultural spheres.

At the personal level, the emphasis on reflexivity, the cultivation of empathy, and related concepts such as transformative learning highlight the foundational

importance of individual capacity-building for engaging in constructive discussions. These personal attributes serve as the bedrock upon which more complex and wide-reaching forms of dialogue are built, emphasising the need for inner development and emotional intelligence in fostering a culture of open and productive conversation.

In the conversational sphere, the article brings to light the significance of shaping and structuring interactions between individuals and groups. Practices such as NVC and active listening are presented as vital for creating environments where diverse perspectives can coalesce into a harmonious dialogue rather than fracturing into divisive discourse. This sphere underscores the importance of community and the social fabric in nurturing spaces where constructive discussions can flourish. It also points to the value of good facilitation practices in creating temporary spaces for CD.

Moving to the institutional sphere, the study delved into the transformative potential of participatory futuring, deliberative democracy and agonistic democracy. These concepts advocate for reimagining decision-making processes to be more inclusive, participatory and reflective of the collective wisdom of diverse stakeholders. This institutional reconfiguration is crucial for embedding the principles of CD into the very structures that govern our societies, ensuring that dialogue influences policy and decision making in meaningful ways.

At the cultural level, exploring narrative change, media theory and social licence to operate sheds light on the power of collective myths, narratives and divisive media structures in shaping societal attitudes towards dialogue. By advocating for a shift in cultural discourses towards collaboration and mutual understanding, this sphere highlights the long-term work needed to reorient societal values and norms in favour of CD.

This article contributes to the academic discourse on CD and offers a pragmatic blueprint for action. Implementing a practical framework necessitates a collaborative effort that spans governmental bodies, non-governmental organisations, community groups and the private sector. In this endeavour, the role of academia, practitioners, policy makers and citizens cannot be overstated; it is only through collective effort and shared commitment that the vision of a more dialogically enriched society can be realised. By articulating a multidimensional and genuinely transdisciplinary approach to fostering dialogue, that is, an approach that focuses on impact, the study provides a pathway for addressing the multifaceted challenges of our time. As we look towards the future, the principles and interventions outlined in this article offer hope and direction for cultivating a society where CD paves the way for a more collaborative, empathetic and understanding world.

Notes

[1] https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/stories/.

[2] https://medialiteracy.org.au/media-literacy-framework/.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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