

Justice Talking

The Meaning of Service

Facilitator's Handbook



Ohio
HUMANITIES
SHARING THE HUMAN STORY



SERVE OHIO
Ohio Commission on Service and Volunteerism

Justice Talking: The Meaning of Service

Doing service puts people into high-need areas, such as schools, relief agencies, and hospitals—wherever a set of hands can make a difference. Yet few organizations afford their members the opportunity to reflect on what service means and the nature of the difference they are making.

Justice Talking encourages people to do just that. The program brings people together to read and discuss “texts”—works of literature, images, video and film clips—that prompt thoughtful dialogue about service, justice, and civic engagement. The practice of reflection can result in a deeper understanding of the values inherent in public service activities, and a more comprehensive consideration of our own service experiences.

If thoughtfully presented and successfully managed, *Justice Talking* can be personally rewarding and professionally fulfilling. Participants in the *Justice Talking* program will:

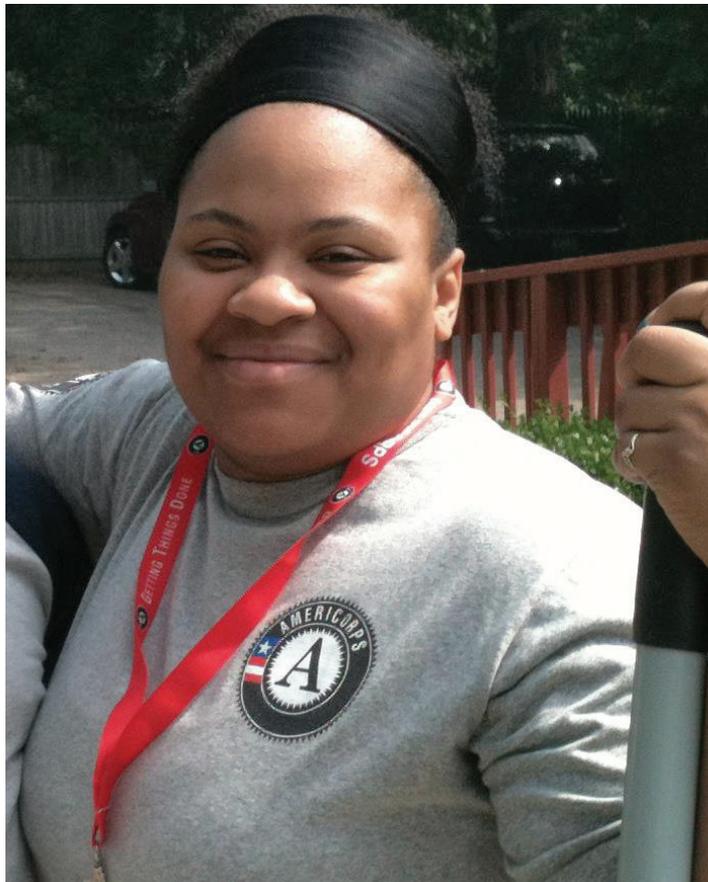
- Value more the service work that they do.
- Learn to think critically about what it means to serve, with perspectives derived from compelling texts.
- Be intellectually stimulated by reading well-constructed texts.
- Be emotionally nourished by the collegial atmosphere of the facilitated discussion.
- Be more likely to sustain a commitment to service.
- Appreciate humanities content as a guide for reflection and understanding important life experiences.

Created by the Illinois Humanities Council in 2001, *Justice Talking* began as a program designed for volunteers in the Chicago area. Through support from the National Endowment for the Humanities, it has spread to AmeriCorps programs in multiple states.

Justice Talking in Ohio is presented by ServeOhio and Ohio Humanities to support the professional development of AmeriCorps members throughout the state. The program embodies Ohio Humanities’ commitment to helping Ohioans define individual values, beliefs, and aspirations, as well as the conviction that what we learn can enhance how we work and the way we live.

This manual was formulated by Robert Colby, Ohio Humanities Program Officer, based in part on an earlier version by Georgina Dodge. The facilitation method described herein includes methods outlined by the Center for Civic Reflection (civicreflection.org) and Visual Thinking Strategies (vtshome.org).





Before You Begin

Essential to the success of a *Justice Talking* series is the atmosphere in which the discussions are held. Many people are not used to discussing readings in a group, exploring different opinions about complicated ideas, or talking with colleagues about the motives behind their work. The prospect of participating in a *Justice Talking* discussion might make people uncomfortable, so it is important that the conditions surrounding the discussions put people at ease.

Location

Choose a room that is comfortable and conducive to conversation. A cramped, uncomfortable space, or one dominated by a massive table that makes it difficult for people to see or hear one another, will not set the ideal tone for discussion. Envision a coffee house atmosphere. Arrange the chairs in a circle.

Snacks

Food adds an informal tone and sets the stage for sharing. It helps people relax and signals a transition from action to reflection.

Time

Another way to put participants at ease is by scheduling discussions at a convenient time of day or night, in an accessible and comfortable space. We suggest a 60-90 minute session.

Frequency

The number and frequency of discussions differs from group to group. Ideally, scheduling a *Justice Talking* session every four weeks helps sustain energy and makes it easier for members to refer to previous reflections. However, if your group's service work does not permit such frequent discussions, at least three *Justice Talking* sessions over the course of the year can have a significant impact.

Group Size

The size of the group will enhance the quality of the discussion. Successful *Justice Talking* series have been conducted with as few as four members and as many as 30. However, the bigger the group, the more likely it is that some people will be reluctant to speak. An ideal size would be between 10 and 15 members. Larger groups can be divided into two parallel groups as long as enough trained facilitators are available.

What is Facilitation?

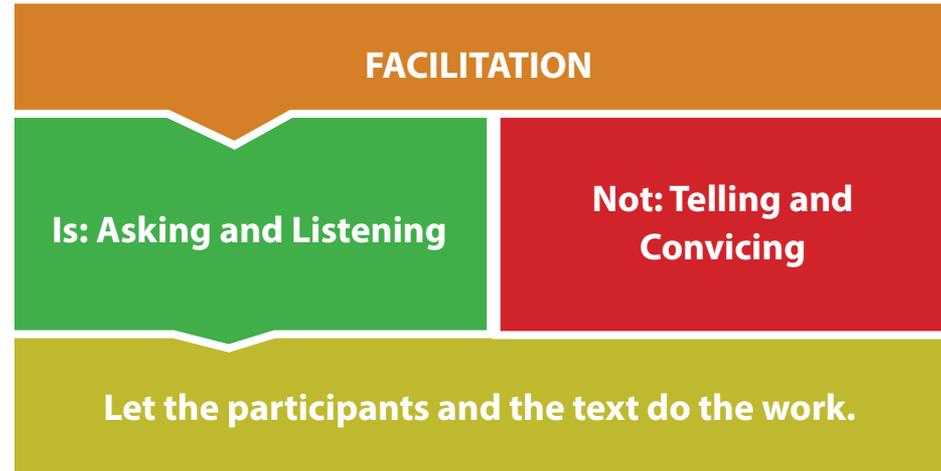
Justice Talking is based on great facilitation. Here are some guiding concepts to become a practiced facilitator.

As a facilitator, your job is to lead conversations about the content, not as teacher but rather as a guide. Questions provoke participants to think deeply, clarify, or re-evaluate their own assumptions and then to reflect upon their experience in light of those assumptions.

Facilitation is different from an academic class in which there is often a separate body of knowledge (critical theory, historical context, a set of political implications) that participants must know in order to make sense of the text.

The key to any facilitation is a combination of open-ended questions, follow-up questions, and active listening. Here's a closer look at these components.

Open-ended questions suggest a genuine openness to what participants have to contribute, what they observe, what they think, what they feel, and



how they make sense of the material under discussion. Open-ended questions can be specific in nature, but they do not suggest a single answer or require specialist's knowledge.

Follow-up questions invite the participant to clarify their observation and ask them to go further by explaining how they interpret the text. This is a good way to underscore the diverse

perspectives in the group. Everyone interprets texts differently based on their own experience.

Active listening affirms each individual's contributions by looking at them when they speak, and repeating back what they have said (in a slightly different way) to ensure clarity and to make each person feel their contribution is valued.





What *Justice Talking* is NOT

Justice Talking is not a **lecture**, where one person possesses the information and dispenses it to others. Everyone participates as equals.

Justice Talking is not a **classroom seminar**. No prior information about the text is required to join the conversation and participate fully.

Justice Talking is not a **debate** or an exchange of mere opinions about political or religious matters. Sharing personal experiences inspired by the text is important. Trying to convince others of one's opinions is not conducive to a successful *Justice Talking* session.



Open ended questions vs. close-ended questions: What is the difference between these questions?

What do you think the author is trying to tell us in this text? vs. *What is this text about?*

What aspects of the text appear to reflect the society of the time? vs. *What is the historical context for this text?*

What about this text resonates with you? vs. *What is the author telling us about the human condition?*

The *Justice Talking* Facilitation Method

Justice Talking is a specific form of facilitation that uses a combination of open-ended questions, follow-up questions, and active listening to elicit three general categories of information:

Observation

Here are some sample open-ended questions in each of these categories. You can use these to structure any *Justice Talking* conversation.

Observation questions are great ways to get the conversation going and keep it flowing naturally.

- *What's going on in the text?*
- *What do you think the author is trying to tell us in this text?*

Interpretation

Interpretation questions are perfect follow-up questions to deepen understanding of individuals' points of view. After actively listening to their observations about the text, you might ask:

- *What did you notice that makes you say that?*
- *What did you see that suggests that?*

Implication

Implication questions get to the heart of the *Justice Talking* program, which is the meaning of service.

- *Does the text reflect any aspects about the service work you are doing or your reasons for doing service?*
- *What are some implications of what we have been discussing for your work/organization/community?*

What to do about context?

When discussing a *Justice Talking* selection the question of context may be important.

This poses a challenge for a facilitated conversation where, ideally, all information is to be found in the text under discussion. However this is not always the case. Sometimes specific issues of context, specialized vocabulary, and references to historic figures or events can be distracting if some people do not understand the references. So how do we address context?

As facilitator, you will want to choose texts you understand completely, including all terms, specialized vocabulary, and references. You can compile a short informational description, no more than 50-125 words—that defines all relevant terms and contextual information. Importantly, the background information texts you write should not seek to interpret the *Justice Talking* selection. They are designed to give only background information so everyone can participate in the work of interpretation equally.

In some cases, informational texts are provided in the training manual, following the *Justice Talking* Curriculum. Check the upper right hand corner of the selection's page in the curriculum for a compass indicating an accompanying informational text. Bring the page with you to the discussion. As facilitator, you can read it to the group—or better yet—

ask one of the participants to read it at the right moment. This is especially important if you created the information text yourself. As facilitator, you should avoid presenting yourself as the conveyor of specialized knowledge.

IMPORTANT:

There is a risk that the informational text will replace the *Justice Talking* selection as the subject of interpretation. Avoid this by introducing the contextual material only after a thoughtful round of open-ended observation and interpretation questions using only the *Justice Talking* selections. Then read the informational text and direct attention back to the *Justice Talking* selection with another open-ended question, such as:

- *With this additional context, what more do you notice about the text?*
- *With this historical background, what more comes to mind about how we can interpret the text?*

Now that you've been introduced to the *Justice Talking* facilitation method, the following sections provide a step-by-step guide to planning, hosting, leading, and evaluating your *Justice Talking* program.

Step One: Planning the Discussion

One of the biggest components of preparing for each discussion is selecting the text to be discussed. The *Justice Talking Curriculum* provides a rich resource. The meaning of service raises many important issues, such as leadership, diversity and differences, equity and need, justice

and identity, community and change. The *Justice Talking* curriculum is structured thematically to allow facilitators to choose texts according to the kinds of conversations they wish to stage. With this in mind, here are several ways to select a text.

Think about the values you want your group to consider.

What are the fundamental questions rumbling through your group? Browse through the themes for selections that address issues around service that might speak to those present concerns.

Consider the length and level of difficulty of each text.

Estimate the amount of time your group will actually have to read the text in advance of your discussions. If you know your group is overwhelmed with work and cannot read ahead, choose short texts that the group can read together during the session itself.

Plan well.

Be sure to honor your members' preparation by not assigning a reading you are not going to talk about. If you plan to spend only an hour on *Justice Talking*, do not assign four readings! Similarly, do not ask people to come prepared to discuss a selection and then neglect to discuss it during your session.

Select a variety of texts.

Choose from multiple genres—fiction, poetry, short stories, drama, lyrics, nonfiction, as well as images and film clips from a range of creative expressions and culture—as long as they are readable and comprehensible. Sometimes an appropriate, provocative image or short film can offer an extremely useful and memorable basis for discussion. If you want to work with a text that includes subject matter closely related to your group's service activities, choose texts from the curriculum that approach a variety of other subjects as well. Be sure to seek diverse perspectives.

Pick provocative texts.

Regardless of the kind of text you select, it is important to remember that a good text is meant to be stimulating. A good text isn't one that provides answers but one that inspires fruitful discussion.

Read and reread.

As part of your preparation, read, reread, and then read the text again—at least three times. Every story, poem, or image has multiple layers of meaning. By rereading, you will be able to formulate the best open-ended questions for the discussions.

Prepare or gather contextual material.

If context is important, and there is a prepared informational text corresponding to your choice of reading, make a printout of that document for the group. You can read it yourself, or ask a member or members of the group to read it out loud. If no text is available, and context is important, prepare the material yourself to have on hand. Contextual material should be brief, factual information about any uncommon terms, definitions, and helpful insights into socially or culturally relevant aspects of the text. It should not be interpretive material or your own perspective on the text. Use the provided examples as models if you create your own.

Follow the guidance in Steps Two, Three, and Four for opening, leading, and closing the *Justice Talking* session.

A Word to the Wise

Some texts might elicit strong responses. This can be an exciting aspect of facilitation, and signals that participants derive meaning from the content. During your selection of texts and throughout the actual discussion, you will need to respect the different values and cultures that may be present in your group. If someone is offended by a reading or a topic, consider alternative solutions to group participation. You might have a one-on-one session with that person or determine together if they should be excused from the discussion entirely. Consider an alternative assignment, such as a short written reflection of 150 words, or a free-form journal response to the experience of engaging with the text.

Step Two: Opening the Discussion

There's no doubt about it. Sometimes opening the discussion can be difficult—especially during the first session. But

little things can help participants feel comfortable enough to make the first comment.

Welcome everyone with a friendly greeting.

Make sure you and everyone else knows one another's names as well.

At least in the beginning, provide name tags or "table tents" for everyone including yourself. Start the first session with introductions. Although you might expect everyone to already know one another, the group's schedule may prevent individuals from spending much time together. Including introductions at the beginning of the series gives everyone an easy way to contribute at least once the very first day.

Be clear about what the participants should expect.

At least for the first few sessions, review what *Justice Talking* is, so everyone knows what to expect. You can read or adapt this paragraph:

"Justice Talking brings people together to read and discuss texts that prompt thoughtful conversations about service, justice, and civic engagement. The practice of reflection can result in a deeper understanding of the values inherent in public service activities, and a more comprehensive consideration of our own service experiences."

Consider opening the session with an icebreaker.

Some facilitators like to use icebreakers while others do not. As facilitator, the choice is up to you and how you perceive the group responding. Keyword search "icebreakers" online for lists of icebreaker techniques. If time is short, feel free to skip this step, as it can often take up valuable time.

Framing

Framing can help prepare the participants for the conversation by shifting to focus on the topic. Here is an example: "Today I'd like us to have a conversation about what community means, and I've chosen a short text that I think will help us have that conversation well. I'm really interested to know how this text can help us reflect on some of the work we do here."



Step Three: Facilitating the Discussion

Leading the discussion and keeping it going for 60 to 90 minutes may seem like a daunting task, but you might be surprised how eager your group is to share their thoughts

about the reading and how it relates to their work. Here is an outline for structuring your *Justice Talking* Session.

Introduce the author of the text.

When you present the text, tell the participants who the author is, when they lived and what nationality they are. This information can be found in a short paragraph on the *Justice Talking* curriculum page. For example:

“Today I’d like us to read a short text by Bertolt Brecht, a 20th-century German-born author.”

Read the text together.

Always start the discussion with the text itself. The text offers the group a baseline to which you can always return. Begin with open-ended questions and follow the *Justice Talking* facilitation method.

Follow this pattern of questions:

Begin with simple **observation** questions such as:

- *What do you think the author is trying to tell us in this text?*
- *What did you first notice when reading this text?*
- *What did you see going on in the story?*

Create a cycle of **observation and interpretation**. Demonstrates active listening by reframing observation comments and asking follow-up questions for clarity to engage interpretation:

- *What did you notice that makes you say that?*
- *What did you see that suggests that?*

Return the conversation to the whole group for additional observations and repeat the pattern of observation and interpretation.

- *What more can we find?*
- *What do other people think?*

Some readings will require additional information. If available locate the short informational text that accompanies the *Justice Talking* selection (look for the compass!). Read all or a part of the informational text aloud to the group and then return to observational questions.

- *With this additional context, what more do you notice about the text?*
- *With this historical background, what more comes to mind about how to interpret the text?*

Continue the cycle of observation and interpretation by asking open-ended questions, demonstrating active listening, reframing comments, asking follow-up questions for clarity, and making sure everyone who wants to speak has a chance.

Engage the issue of **implications** for service. This is the goal of every *Justice Talking* session:

- *Does the text reflect any aspects about the service you are doing?*
- *Does the dilemma faced by the character in the story reflect any aspects of your service?*
- *Does this text shed light on what inspired you to do service?*
- *What are some implications of what we have discussed for your service, organization, or community?*

Watch the Clock!

Throughout the discussion, pay attention to time. It can be surprising how quickly time passes during a good conversation, and managing time is very important for putting people at ease. Let the participants know how much time they have for any activities. When the discussion has almost reached the end of the allotted time, you should begin to close the discussion so that you can end on time.

Step Four: Closing the Discussion

Be intentional about how you will end the discussion. Ending on a strong note can help maintain momentum and enthusiasm for the next meeting. You may wish to formulate a conclusion based on one of the three options

below. Then clearly signal the end of the session and be sure to thank participants. Feel free to adapt these to your own strengths and the dynamics of your group.

Choose one of the three following options.

1. Summarize key points from the discussion

Offer a summary or ask your group what they thought were the most important points.

2. Draw connections between discussions

Pose a topic or question that points toward the theme of the next discussion. You could also offer comments about connections with previous discussions.

3. Evaluate the session

Prompt the group to express what was useful or interesting about this conversation. This may be done verbally or in writing; either way, you'll have a rich source of data that can inform your future planning.

Clearly signal the end of the session with a closing statement.

"This has been a great conversation. I really appreciate the insights and openness you have all demonstrated. It's great to hear how much you have been thinking about these issues and the ways they impact the work that we do."

Thank participants and preview next meeting

Regardless of how you choose to end the meeting, be sure to thank the group for participating in the *Justice Talking* session. If the next meeting has already been scheduled, you should remind the group of the date and time before they leave the current session. Also, be sure to collect contact information from all participants before adjourning. As much as possible, you should follow-up with people who miss a session. This will help you understand if they are missing because they are not interested, too busy, or are dissatisfied with the program. This also lets people know that their participation is important to the group.

Record the session in the Facilitation Log.

Next Time!

After each session, you should begin preparing the next session as soon as possible. As you do, keep in mind that facilitating this kind of discussion is really challenging. If you meant to be quiet and talked, forgot to ask that really good question, missed a great opportunity to tie remarks together, or didn't get to interact with each individual participant, forgive yourself. You will be more ready to meet the challenge next time!



Helpful Tips

Be a strong leader.

Leadership and group dynamics are forces you can harness for a successful *Justice Talking* session. Facilitators should take a leading role in maintaining a healthy group dynamic by not allowing any one person to dominate the discussion (including the facilitator!). The rest of the group will support you in this effort.

Don't allow the discussion to be derailed by one person.

Everyone has something to share. Some will hold back if one or two individuals begin dominating the conversation. As facilitator, your role is to ensure everyone has space to share. If an individual is sharing too much, feel free to politely interject and say something like: "I want to be sure others have a chance to share. What do other people have to say about this topic?"

Strike a balance in the pace of the conversation.

Open-ended questions are always good prompts, but sometimes a group is quiet, or a conversation slow to take off. Allow time for participants to formulate their thoughts and share. Be comfortable with silence. Also be aware when a conversation point has reached its natural conclusion and the group is ready to move on. Sometimes silence means everyone has shared and it may be time to move on to the next question or text.

Be open to new directions.

Any group of people has differences, even if at first it seems like a homogenous group. As participants respond to a complex reading, these differences will emerge. Help people perceive and explore them. Recognize and honor disagreement and pluralities of interpretation. Listen to what your members are saying. If someone introduces a new idea based on the text that might add to the reflection, allow the conversation to flow in that new direction.

Be brave during uncomfortable moments.

If a participant says something inappropriate, such as a racist or sexist remark, take a few breaths and wait. Often your group will respond to the comment on their own. If they don't, you might prompt them to discuss the remark. "What do others think about what was just said?" However, since this is meant to be a safe environment, you don't necessarily want to turn the blame to the individual who made the comment. Instead, remind the group that language occasionally has implications we might not immediately recognize or intend. It is important to think carefully during these discussions and during our service about how our own underlying assumptions can impact others.

Be attentive but firm if someone becomes overly emotional.

Challenging texts and in-depth conversations can elicit strong emotional responses from participants. Occasionally a participant can become highly emotional based on something found in the text or something another participant has said. If this should happen, be sure to acknowledge the situation by saying something like, "I can see that this is very emotional for you. Can you share with the group what it is that you are feeling/thinking?" If the person can share, allow them a meaningful amount of time to articulate what they are feeling/thinking. If however, they simply cannot share in a way that is meaningful to the rest of the group (think of their needs here) then invite that person to step out of the conversation accompanied by a co-facilitator or trusted team member who can join them outside to keep them company and consider what steps to take for their proper care and assistance. Just as *Justice Talking* is not a lecture or a literature class discussion, so too is it not group therapy or a clinical environment. *Justice Talking* facilitators are not trained or licensed as clinicians. *Justice Talking* is a professional development opportunity where professional decorum should be observed at all times.

Be strong if a conversation becomes heated.

Occasionally, a discussion may become heated. If this happens, acknowledge the concerns while returning the atmosphere to something more inviting: "I hear both of your points. This is a really difficult topic, and that's why it's so important to reflect on these issues." Try to include others in the discussion or steer the conversation back to the reading. Should things continue to be too tense, introduce a new question or call a 5-minute break. Consider inviting the people having the heated discussion to continue their debate later on their own.

Reflecting After a *Justice Talking* Series

There is a great deal of value in providing an opportunity for reflection to colleagues who have similar commitments. As a series, *Justice Talking* is simply part of a larger professional development process for most participants. The readings and discussions provide a structure and a community for people to share what motivates them and how and why service is important. Those who have participated have voiced that the program has a positive impact on their view of service. Participants find that *Justice Talking* helps them be more open to new ideas and different perspectives, thus making service more meaningful and rewarding. It may reduce stress levels and the potential for burnout. It can be reinvigorating and increase job satisfaction.

Documenting Your *Justice Talking* Experience

Be sure to accurately record your *Justice Talking* facilitation experience. In the *Justice Talking* Manual you will find a Facilitation Record. Please keep a running list of all the *Justice Talking* sessions you facilitated. Be sure to fill out the information at the time of the session and record what text you chose, the venue with address, any co-facilitators, and the number of members that participated.

Evaluation

Towards the end of the service year, you will receive from ServeOhio a link to an online survey. Please fill this out so we can continue to have up-to-date and current information on the effectiveness of this program. Thank you!

ServeOhio

ServeOhio, Ohio's Governor-appointed commission on service and volunteerism, strengthens Ohio communities through AmeriCorps and volunteer engagement. Through programs and initiatives funded and supported by ServeOhio, thousands of Ohioans of all ages engage in and are recognized for their service. Interested participants may learn more about ServeOhio at www.serveohio.org.

Ohio Humanities

Ohio Humanities is the state-based partner of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Through grants and sponsored programs we help Ohioans interpret the past, imagine the future, and define individual values. We're committed to creating vibrant communities throughout our state. Discover more about Ohio Humanities at www.ohiohumanities.org.



SERVE OHIO
Ohio Commission on Service and Volunteerism