



The
MUSEUM
as a place for
constructive
dialogue

POSTAL MUSEUM
2024

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POSTAL MUSEUM

SITRA

Democracy is Built Between People in Everyday Life

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Democracy is facing many challenges globally. There is currently less room for democracy even in strong democracies like Finland, with the nation meeting challenges especially in the field of societal participation and polarisation. Even though Finns trust societal institutions, they don't believe they are able to influence them. Moreover, the majority of leaders doubt the citizens' ability to participate in political debate. Meanwhile, most citizens feel that the public debate has deteriorated.

Democracy works best when people not only trust their societal institutions and leaders but also each other and their own abilities and influence.

Freedom of thought, speech, and assembly are among democracy's greatest strengths. Together, we can build a common understanding of our past, present, and future, and creatively challenge that understanding as needed, too. With dialogue, we can be more than the sum of our parts. This is more important than ever in a fast-paced era dominated by overlapping crises, which sometimes appears devoid of historical understanding.

Sitra is a Future Fund whose main goal is to defend and renew Finnish democracy. We feel that our system of representative democracy and our policies need many kinds of changes. At the same time, we find it important that Finnish citizens have better and more diverse opportunities to be heard, participate, and influence political decision-making.

Democracy is not only a political system, but also a way of life that is lived day to day in many everyday situations and communities. Museums have a key role in fostering a democratic way of life and imagining positive futures. They maintain and make accessible our valuable cultural heritage and are also an important forum for everyday encounters and dialogue that build trust between people and communities.

This made it natural for Sitra and the Finnish Postal Museum to start collaboration in the autumn of 2023. The national responsibility given to the Finnish Postal Museum and Tampere Historical Museums by the Ministry of Education and Culture in 2023 shows that managing and curating the cultural heritage of digital life and communication is valuable today. At the same time, it is important to create a new kind of space for museum encounters in which citizens can gain understanding of and discuss our digital life and the influence of technological development on society.

This guide demonstrates how rich, constructive, and diverse the dialogue has been. We have encouraged the participants to imagine alternative and positive futures through the project discussions. Thinking about the future is an important skill in democracy, because if we don't imagine our future, someone else will imagine it and carry out their version of it for us.

In the age of digitalisation and overlapping crises, the task of the museums in fostering understanding and democracy is more important than ever. We hope that museums will offer more spaces for constructive public debate and encounters in the future. This project has highlighted the interest in this.

1. Dialogues on Digital Life in Museums

Constructive dialogues are not a new invention in the public facing work of museums, and several Finnish museums have used them in their work. For example, the Finnish National Museum¹, the Museum of Finnish Architecture², The Kymenlaakso Museum³, and the Lahti City Museums⁴ have organised constructive dialogues. However, as dialogues aren't an old or established part of museums' work, the Finnish Postal Museum's project has aimed to test different versions of the Timeout method and develop a guide and a model for organising dialogues in museums. The goal has been to find means for organising dialogues efficiently so that they serve both the participants and the museum without burdening the museum staff too much. One of the main questions in the project has been why organise dialogues in museums instead of somewhere else. What can museums offer the participants compared to, for example, libraries? And how can museums benefit from the dialogues in their public facing work and internally? Can museums offer a space for dialogues not related to their collections or exhibitions? This guide aims to answer these questions, encourage others to organise Timeout dialogues, and offer advice on where to start and how to continue ongoing work. The dialogues in 2024 discussed the topical subject of digital life relating to the task of museum with national responsibility for communication, games, mail, and digital life, as this was assigned to the Finnish Postal Museum and Tampere Historical Museums in 2024.

Kupla x Sitra Project: Testing and Applying the Timeout Method

In 2023, the Finnish Postal Museum started a project funded by Sitra organising Timeout dialogues in collaboration with the Rupriikki Media Museum and the Finnish Museum of Games in the Finnish Postal Museum's new collaborative space Kupla. The collaborative space Kupla (name derives from the meaning "echo chamber" in Finnish) opened in February 2024 and is designed to foster dialogue and encounters between visitors. We hope that the lessons generated by our project might encourage other museums to organise dialogues on social topics and, thereby, offer spaces for strengthening democracy and fostering trust.

When the project started in December 2023, we decided the dates for dialogues in the spring term and started to plan them. We also started inviting participants to the first dialogues. At this point, we had already decided to organise both two-hour-long dialogues using the Timeout method and pop-up dialogues called Current Kupla. The

1 <https://www.eratauko.fi/kansallismuseo/>

2 <https://www.mfa.fi/museo-dialogissa/>

3 <https://vellamo-kanava.fi/milta-teollisuus-tuntuu/>

4 <https://www.lahdenhistoriallinen.fi/en/explore/muistamo/>

latter were organised on Friday afternoons when the entry to the museum is free. All dialogues were free of charge for participants.

In the spring of 2024, between February and May, we arranged dialogues mostly in the collaborative space Kupla at the Postal Museum. One workshop was also held in the EMYA2024 conference in Portugal. Another discussion was part of the National Dialogues of spring 2024, with the topic linked to their theme “security and trust”. The notes from the National Dialogues were collected in a summary⁵ reflecting the experiences of the various parties.

June and July marked a pause in our dialogues. The second series of dialogues took place from August to November. In the autumn of 2024, one dialogue took place in the Well Said discussion festival in Lahti, and one at the “NEMO – Can we talk? Museums facing polarisation” conference in Romania. In addition, we tested a remote dialogue and a streamed dialogue.

In total, the project included 22 dialogues, 10 of which were open Timeout dialogues, 6 current Kupla dialogues, and 6 other types of applications of the Timeout method. In total, almost 200 people participated.

This guide is also an important part of our project. Even though the project didn’t aim to develop a new method but rather to use an existing one, we hope that documenting and sharing the lessons learned in this project will help organisers of future dialogues.

⁵ https://kansallisetdialogit.fi/wp-content/uploads/FINAL-KaDi_Security-and-trust_WEB.pdf



2. The Museum as a Place for Constructive Dialogue and Strengthening Democracy

“A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.”⁶

– ICOM Museum Definition of 2022

The International Council of Museums issued a new museum definition in 2022⁷. The definition emphasises the open, permanent, and diverse nature of museums, as well as the support and opportunities they provide. Museums seek to offer visitors researched information and to serve the society as widely as possible. This makes museums an excellent venue for discussion: they are open to everyone and encourage thinking and dialogue. Of course, it’s important to acknowledge that not everyone visits museums and that they aren’t as inviting and familiar to everyone⁸. This may affect the events in museums and, consequently, the dialogues, too. In the best case, however, dialogues attract people who might otherwise not visit a museum. Museums may also seem to be more approachable if they offer an opportunity to have a say on what is displayed, for example through dialogues.

The Museum of Opportunities – The Museum Policy Programme 2030 of the Ministry of Education and Culture published in 2018 also discusses the changing role of museums⁹. The museums of 2030 are envisioned as active participants, strengthening democracy and offering a forum for open interactions¹⁰. Promoting democracy and equality is also mentioned in the new Museums Act of Finland¹¹. Constructive dialogue is one of the ways in which museums can fulfil their new role as supporters of equality, community, and democracy. Museums offer not only a physical location but also a concrete chance for people to be heard and find courage to continue participating in public debate. By offering dialogues in addition to traditional guided tours, museums provide a space for reflexion and

6 <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>

7 <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>

8 Holm, Leskinen & Tyynilä 2017

9 Mattila 2018

10 Mattila 2018: 13

11 Museums Act 314/2019

active participation. Naturally, this means that the museum's role as an educator is smaller and that the facilitator has less control over what comes up in the dialogue. It's useful to decide beforehand how much fact checking the facilitator should do. At what point should the facilitator step in and, for example, should the participants have first refusal on correcting each other? In any case, the facilitator's role is not to check facts but rather to maintain the constructive dialogue, even if the facilitators, who are museum professionals, do in fact occupy a double role in safeguarding historical facts. This is also discussed in the Smithsonian's Dialogue Toolkit for Educators¹².

Dialogues have been used to strengthen democracy and increase understanding in museums around the world. One example is the Arc of Dialogue created as a part of the Sites of Conscience coalition's project¹³. The method has been used in many museums in the United States to organise dialogues¹⁴ and create example dialogues as part of exhibitions for teachers to use in their work¹⁵. A difficult and still topical subject has also been discussed in relation to the travelling exhibition "Race: Are we so different" in the USA¹⁶. Thus, museums can function as spaces for encounters in which people can share their experiences and thoughts on the present, learn more about history, and think about the future based on current and historical experiences. Museums can remind us of how we have arrived at the present, looking at, for example, how fast digitalisation has advanced and how some historical phenomena may be surprisingly topical.

Museums build on research and display their collections accordingly. However, they operate in a constantly developing environment in which they can offer a space for encounters and reflexion in addition to exhibitions. The past can be remembered and history interpreted side by side with sharing current experiences and imagining the future we are building now. Museums don't need to take a stand during the dialogues. Instead, they can offer a space and encourage visitors to contemplate, discuss, and learn through widening their horizons. Museums can act as a site of encounters between different people and cultures in the present and not only a place where modern people can encounter past cultures and people. Widening the range of people's experiences increases their understanding of others and fosters empathy between people in the present. At best, people can find ways of changing things around them and increasing their trust in the future and in democracy. Thus, museums can take a more active role in creating the cultural heritage of the future along with contemporary collecting¹⁷. Our dialogues always retained a historical context in order to inform current understandings of where we come from.

12 <https://americanindian.si.edu/sites/1/files/pdf/education/NMAI-Americans-dialogue-toolkit.pdf>

13 <https://www.sitesofconscience.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Sites-of-Conscience-Dialogue-Facilitation-and-Resources.pdf>

14 Venieri 2022

15 <https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360/pdf/Native-NY-Toolkit-Educators.pdf>

16 Venieri 2022

17 Paaskoski & al. 2022: 15

Similarly, reflecting on the future was important in every discussion. The museum's superpower in dialogues lies in its ability to connect the past, present, and future.

The Timeout Method in Museums

Timeout is a method for constructive dialogue developed by the Timeout Foundation. The Timeout method is not a prerequisite for constructive dialogue. However, in this project, the Timeout method had many advantages: Timeout is an existing brand that some participants recognised, and they were able to view materials on the foundation's website. Also, the museum didn't need to reinvent the wheel, as there was a vast amount of existing material to aid in organising the dialogues. This made it easier for the Vapriikki Museum Centre and Finnish Postal Museum staff to become trained Timeout facilitators and to use a tried and tested method in the dialogues. As the Timeout Foundation encourages users to adapt the method for their own needs, the method itself offered opportunities rather than restrictions.

The Timeout dialogue is premised on participants engaging in constructive dialogue on social matters by committing to shared ground rules for dialogue¹⁸ and by speaking from their own experience. Through this method, it is especially important for participants to speak from their own experience: it is all too easy to start arguing against opinions and "I heard someone say" style arguments. In contrast, people's own experiences are harder to dismiss. In Timeout dialogues, the facilitator will ideally explain their role in the beginning and takes responsibility for ensuring that the rules are respected. The facilitator also has the power to pause the dialogue and steer it in the agreed direction; focusing on experience instead of opinions. Accordingly, it is important to explain to the participants that they represent themselves and their own experiences. For example, while researchers may find it hard to step back from their role as experts, focusing on their own experiences can ultimately be liberating. In Timeout dialogues, the goal is not to convince others of the veracity of one's own opinions, but rather to listen to other participant's experiences and, through this, learn more about oneself and others.

In addition to serving as visitor activities, Timeout dialogues can also function as an internal resource for museums. Dialogues on diverse topics, also unrelated to work, help create a better workplace atmosphere, with the staff stopping for a moment to listen to and learn more about each other. Dialogues can also be used as a tool in, for example, exhibition planning by giving a voice to everyone regardless of status and personality. This may open new points of view on the exhibition using the in-house personnel.

One of Timeout's greatest strengths is anonymous or near anonymous dialogue. The participants put aside their titles and introduce themselves with only their first

18 <https://www.timeoutdialogue.fi/tool/ground-rules-for-a-constructive-discussion/>

names. Even if the dialogue is recorded, the speakers' identities are left out. The facilitator also reminds the participants of the dialogue's confidentiality during the dialogue: while the participants can say that they participated and what the topic was, quotes and their fellow participants' names are only known to the participants themselves. This gives everyone a chance to speak more freely.

From a Safer Space to a Braver Space

The dialogues reported on here followed the safer space principles created for the collaborative space Kupla¹⁹. Naturally, although the Timeout rules seek to foster an equal and respectful atmosphere it is still important for the discussions that everyone in the group has agreed to beforehand. The facilitator is responsible for ensuring that the rules are respected. When the dialogues were carried out in Finnish, the word for rules ("säännöt") did not raise questions, but in English it seemed somewhat restrictive. One option would be to use the word "guidelines" rather than "rules", to soften the impact. Similarly, it's useful to decide on the principles for a safer space before the dialogue: it's important that everyone feels safe enough to express themselves in the dialogue, and insulting language is not allowed. However, it is important to recognise that while discussing difficult topics may be an implicitly challenging experience for the participants, leaving our comfort zones may teach us more than merely discussing with like-minded people. Consequently, it may be useful to use the term "braver space" in reference to the dialogues.

Research into the possibilities afforded by the 'braver space' model has been carried out in, for example, the United States, where it has been used when discussing social justice²⁰. These discussions demonstrated that recognising one's own privileges and discussing difficult topics requires some tolerance to discomfort and hence does not entirely fit the term "safe" if understood as comfortable for everyone.

The principles for a braver space can be combined with the principles for a safer space. Indeed, the Kupla principles for a safer space encourage everyone to agree to disagree in a constructive spirit and to learn from each other; we should not assume that others will automatically know and be able to do the same things as us. For dialogues, it's important that the rules or guidelines ensure that everyone not only feels safe to participate but also to make mistakes and to learn. Accordingly, combining braver space principles with safer space principles may be useful for dialogues.

As finding a balance between safety, comfort, and discomfort may be difficult, it's important that the facilitator explains the rules of the dialogue and ensures that they are followed along with the principles of the dialogue. Because the facilitator isn't a mind reader, the participants should be encouraged to speak out and tackle difficult

19 <https://www.postimuseo.fi/tule-meille/turvallisemman-tilan-periaatteet/>

20 Arao & Clemens 2013

subjects and reminded that they can always refuse to further discuss a difficult subject. The facilitator may find comfort and courage in reminding the participants in the beginning of the dialogue that they have the power to pause the discussion if needed. Clarifying the facilitator's role in the beginning makes it easier for the participants to accept it.



3. Dialogues Organised During the Project

We decided to test two discussion methods at the beginning of the project: the classic Timeout dialogue and the current Kupla pop-up dialogues. In the classic Timeout dialogues, the participants signed up to the dialogue in advance and the two-hour discussion followed the template²¹ on the Timeout Foundation's website. The dialogue included an introduction by either the facilitator or an external speaker. In some cases, the external speaker joined the dialogue, and in others the introduction was carried out remotely and the speaker left after it. Some examples of introductions were an excerpt from a school radio programme, and contributions by researchers or experts by experience. Regardless of its style, the introduction was meant to lead the participants to reflect on the topic from a new perspective and to offer thoughts for the upcoming dialogue. The group stayed the same from the introduction through to thanks at the end. The dialogue was free of charge for the participants, and everyone received a free ticket to the museum centre as a thank you.

The Current Kupla dialogues were carried out as pop-up discussions using a light version of the Timeout rules. They were scheduled at times when the museum centre had free entry, and the participants could join and leave as they liked during the two-hour dialogue. The topics were selected a week before from prominent subjects covered in the media and then posted in social media and on the museum's website. The dialogues didn't have an introduction, but were instead based on one or two newspaper articles that were available in print for participants joining after the start of the dialogue. Participants were not invited to the Current Kupla dialogues, and any museum visitor could join the discussion.

Current Kupla required more from the facilitator, who didn't know how many participants there would be and had to be prepared to explain the topic and rules to new arrivals on the fly. Printing out the rules or showing them on a screen helped, but the facilitator still needed to welcome new arrivals and explain what was being discussed, to make it easier to join. The facilitator also needed to be prepared to take a more active role in the discussion because there might not have been that many participants. Still, a pop-up dialogue like Current Kupla requires much fewer resources for preparation and can be organised in a short time. Nevertheless, this method requires more flexibility from the facilitator during the dialogue.

In contrast, a classical Timeout dialogue requires more preparation beforehand. For example, people might not find information about the event in social media or on the website in time and need to be invited. Personal invitations, especially from acquaintances, worked best. Various partners made the invitation process easier: instead of the organiser

21 <https://www.timeoutdialogue.fi/tool/stages-and-objectives/>

trying to invite an individual, invested contacts proved to be the best link between the dialogue organiser and the potential participants. For example, instead of trying to invite young people personally, it was better to ask teachers or coaches to deliver the message.

In addition to the dialogues mentioned above, we organised dialogues for existing groups as workshops at the EMYA2024 and NEMO conferences, as a pop-up at the Well Said Discussion Festival in Lahti, and as part of the National Dialogues. Especially the preparations for the National Dialogues and the Well Said Discussion Festival provided new insights and ideas for future dialogues. Participating in the National Dialogues also ensured that the summary of the discussion would be used in decision-making, as the notes from all the National Dialogues were collated into one summary report. One of the dialogues was organised remotely, and the dialogue on accessibility on digital platforms was streamed on the Finnish national broadcaster's Yle Areena platform.

Tips for Organising Dialogues

CLASSIC TIMEOUT DIALOGUE

- Choose the topic and time. Reflect on whom the dialogue is for: is the topic universal or does it affect a certain group especially? It's easier to decide whom to invite to a targeted dialogue rather than a universal one. If the topic is universal, it's also good to emphasise that the participants don't need to be experts. For example, many people are interested in technology topics like artificial intelligence, but they often feel that they don't know enough to discuss them. However, these are the people who should be encouraged to participate to get a diverse group and increase the confidence to discuss.
- Draft the invite, the topic for the discussion, and description. The header should be concise but thought-provoking.
- Do you need notes of the discussion? Then you need someone to take notes during the dialogue or a recorder to record it. Taking notes is slower than recording, but at least the person will surely be switched on unlike a recorder. Recording might also feel intimidating to the participants. In our experience, transcribing a recording was slower than transcribing notes.
- If there is an audience, mention this in the invitation.
- Invite people personally! This ensures that you get participants.

CURRENT KUPLA POP-UP DIALOGUES

- Decide the topic and time. Think of the topic, target group, and description just as in the classic dialogue. Simpler topics are better, since the participants may join and leave during the dialogue.
- On the day of the dialogue, make available the light version of rules and discussion materials, such as a newspaper article.
- Arrange chairs in a circle and remove any tables from the middle. Leave spaces between the chairs, so people can move freely.
- Make sure there is always at least one empty chair available during the dialogue, so it's inviting to join. When a new participant joins, give them a quick summary of what has been said so far.

RULES FOR CURRENT KUPLA:

- 1. Listen to the others and do not interrupt or start additional discussions.** (Timeout Ground rules)
- 2. Speak about your own experience.** (Timeout Ground rules)
- 3. Relate what you say to what the others have said and use everyday language.** (Timeout Ground rules)
- 4. Be present.** (Do not check your phone.)
- 5. You don't need to participate from beginning to end and you can join and leave during the dialogue.**

A Short Presentation of an Exhibition as Introduction

- The dialogue can be arranged as a pop-up or classic dialogue. It can be marketed as either an event the participants sign up to or an open guided tour including a discussion.
- Choose exhibition themes to highlight for discussion. What questions arise from the exhibition that are relatable today?
- For example, the Riding the Radio Waves exhibition deals with the history of radio in Finland, and offers questions about participants' nostalgic radio memories, or what people think of new technology today compared to history, or the need for preparedness in the current global situation.

REMOTE DIALOGUE

- The Timeout Foundation offers useful instructions for a remote dialogue session²². We added some tips.
- We reminded the participants that the goal isn't to look for correct answers. So, for example, googling isn't needed during the dialogue.
- It's best to switch off emails and other notifications during the dialogue. Remote participants are on their computers, so multitasking is more tempting than during in-person dialogues.
- We also deactivated the chat during the dialogue to avoid starting additional discussions there. However, the chat can be useful in some dialogues to help everyone join more easily.
- The person taking notes offered technical support for the participants so that the facilitator could focus on the dialogue.

22 <https://www.timeoutdialogue.fi/tool/remote-timeout/>

STREAMED DIALOGUE

- We streamed the dialogue on accessibility on digital platforms on the Finnish Broadcasting Company's platform Yle Areena. The stream was part of a pilot project where Yle offered external partners a chance to stream content on their Yle Areena platform²³.
- We invited the participants personally. Because of the live streaming, we sent the questions to the participants for comments in advance.
- We aimed to foster a Timeout spirit in the dialogue by underlining talking from experience. The participants didn't introduce themselves with their titles, and instead explained their own relationship to the topic. This also gave them a chance to tell others about their expertise if they wanted to.
- The streaming determined the time frame for the dialogue, so it was especially important to stick to the schedule.
- A streamed Timeout style dialogue makes it possible for a wider audience to learn from the participants' experiences.

23 <https://yle.fi/aihe/a/20-10005958>

Dialogues in 2024

February 7, How to Approach the Agencies? Remote or in Person Customer Service?

February 14, Does Privacy Matter Anymore?

February 23, Current Kupla: Healthcare.

March 13, Let's Stay in Touch!

March 21, Does the Flood of Information Give a Sense of Safety or Cause Anxiety? How the Fast News Cycle Affects our Emotions.

March 22, Current Kupla: AI as Therapist, Partner and Friend?

April 3, Multifaceted Phone Project – What Can We Learn from the Successes and Failures of Nokia N-Gage?

April 17, Available 24/7? The Strengths and Challenges of Digital Communication.

April 26, Current Kupla: Do you Depend on your Digital Devices?

May 17, Current Kupla: Are you Overwhelmed by News?

May 21, Does Digitalisation Offer Safety and Trust? (As part of National Dialogues)

August 9, Current Kupla: Pics or it Didn't Happen.

September 13, Current Kupla: Hopeful Images.

September 19, AI and Digital Crafts?

September 27, What is the Ecological Footprint of Digitalisation? Who Decides How Sustainable our Digital Lives Are? (As part of the Well Said Discussion Festival in Lahti)

October 30, How is our Everyday Technology in the Future? What Should It Not Be Like?

November 19, Can Small Businesses Make It Without Digital Courage? How Are Digital Platforms Part of an Entrepreneurs' Life? (Remote dialogue)

November 21, Accessibility on Digital Platforms (Streamed on Yle Arena)

4. Organising a Dialogue

In this section, you will find a summary of the general guidelines on how we organised the discussions, what we found useful, and what tools we used. For more information on organising a Timeout dialogue, you can visit the Timeout Foundation's website. We have included information found on the site in this guide only in so far as we used it in organising dialogues during the project. Our aim is to help make organising dialogues easier by testing it. Everyone will find their preferred tools by trial and error, but we hope this model can be helpful. However, it's not intended to be followed literally.

Schedule

We planned the schedule for all spring dialogues in the late autumn of 2023 and the autumn dialogues in the late summer of 2024. In the spring, we decided the exact discussion topics only a month before each dialogue, which made marketing this series of dialogues more difficult. For the autumn series we decided the topics and drafted short descriptions of each Timeout dialogue before the first discussion. Only the topics of Current Kupla dialogues were selected from media about a week before the dialogue, to keep the themes current. Deciding the topics for all dialogues of the season in one go made it possible to promote them together. Planning the schedule in advance also made it easier to fit the dialogues with other museum activities. At the same time, we also decided who would take notes and be the facilitator for each dialogue. Each dialogue had one person in charge taking care of meetings and planning the schedule.

Planning

We aimed to link the dialogue topics to digital life, so that each pair of facilitators could choose an approach that was interesting to them. The facilitator pairs chose the topics for the dialogues, drafted the descriptions, structures and questions for them. The pair could also decide on the introduction: Whether to invite an external speaker to introduce the dialogue or use own materials? Who is the dialogue for? For example, would the dialogue benefit from participants of different ages? A restricted target group makes it easier to decide whom to invite. Universal topics may be more difficult when inviting because it's harder to target the invitations at specific people. People may also be unsure of whether they have enough expertise to weigh in on a subject. This is why it's important to emphasize in the invite that expertise isn't needed.

Notes and Recording

You can make notes of the dialogue or record it. We at the Finnish Postal Museum tried both and sent a summary of the notes to the participants. This also ensures that the organiser has a record of the discussion. This requires a person to take

notes or to use a recorder. Remember to allocate time for making a copy of the notes or transcribing the recording and removing participants' names. It's also good to consider in advance whether there are any points you especially want to record during the dialogue. In our experience, recording, transcribing and writing out the transcript took much more resources than using notes taken by a person during the dialogue.

Introduction

Each dialogue included an introduction to the topic. Sometimes, an external speaker gave a short talk and at other times the facilitator made thought-provoking comments, for example on current media topics. A short, guided tour of an exhibition also works well as an introduction. In this case, the theme of the exhibition determines the dialogue topic. We also asked external speakers to include a historical point of view in their introductions, which often gave the dialogue a personal touch related to changes in technology and communication. The introductions lasted from 10 to 15 minutes and the exhibition tours from 20 to 30 minutes.

Marketing and Invitations

We promoted the dialogues to our stakeholders, advertised them on the websites of the Finnish Postal Museum and the Vapriikki Museum Centre, as well as in local newspapers, flyers available in the collaborative space Kupla, and in paper ads on the Tampere main library's bulletin board. We also sent out personal invitations. Personal invitations were sent to the friends and family of staff, as well as to others who might be interested in the dialogues. We also sent invitations to members of various groups through our contacts. Personal invitations proved to be the most effective, but they also required most work. Invitations sent through contacts were the most effective considering the effort required.

No invitations were sent to the Current Kupla dialogues, but we promoted them on our website, with paper flyers on site, and in our social media posts. The choice of social media channel depended on each topic. For example, we used TikTok to promote topics that might interest young audiences.

While invitations should have a short explanation of the Timeout Method, it's good to keep this short. Lofty promises and long explanations may not sound enticing to the recipient. Remember also not to promise more than you can deliver in the invitation. For example, don't say that the dialogue may be used in decision-making if a channel for that has not yet been established.

Number of Participants

We kept the maximum number of participants to ten, so that everyone could have a say without needing to wait too long for their turn. The participants were asked

to confirm their participation at least one week before the dialogue, but we also accepted participants after that. If we didn't have at least six participants a week before the dialogue, we postponed it. There were cancellations during the week leading up to the dialogue almost every time, but with a minimum of six confirmed participants the group size stayed reasonable despite any last-minute cancellations. The smallest group had four participants. Any smaller than that would require active participation from everyone, and participants wouldn't have the option of listening quietly when they prefer.

Communication with the Participants

We sent the participants a confirmation message when they signed up. This informed them that they would receive instructions about a week before the dialogue. In the instructions, we explained when the facilitator would be in the museum lobby to greet them. This meant that participants arriving at a new place wouldn't need to find the venue on their own. We also asked the participants to call or email us if they had to cancel. Everyone informed us if they couldn't attend and there weren't any no shows. We also mentioned there would be refreshments. In our case, this meant snacks and flavoured water.



CHECKLIST FOR DIALOGUE ORGANISERS

Before the Day of the Dialogue

- Choose the date and topic and draft a one-paragraph description of the dialogue.
- Plan the venue and refreshments – can you put the chairs in a circle, what snacks and drinks will you offer and how will you procure them?
- Do you need someone to take notes, or will you record the dialogue? Confirm who is taking notes or let the participants know that the dialogue will be recorded.
- If you want an external speaker to give the introduction, invite one!
- Start promoting the event well in advance, ideally a month or two before it.
- Invite the participants – personal invitations work best, but you should still send them in good time and decide on a registration deadline. Remember to include the privacy notice if you collect contact information.
- Promote the event in social media.
- Send a confirmation message to the participants.

On the Day of the Dialogue

- Check that there are clipboards, pens, paper, nametags, and ground rules for constructive dialogue for everyone.
- Put the chairs in a circle for the discussion. If possible, provide small tables or similar, so that people can put the papers and such away if they need to.
- Remember to put the refreshments out.
- Greet the participants in the agreed meeting place.
- If there are several organisers, one can wait for any latecomers.
- Allow time for people to chat after the dialogue; for example, end it 15 minutes before the museum closes.

After the Discussion

- Send the participants a thank you note.
- Write a summary and send it to the participants, if agreed.
- If the summary is meant to be used in decision-making, send it and offer to explain it as needed to ensure it is received well.

Example Schedule

Dialogue topic: Available 24/7? Strengths and Challenges of Digital Communication.

Time and date: March 17 from 3 to 5 pm.

Type: Timeout dialogue (advance participant registration).

2:30 Preparing the venue, checking the remote connection with the external speaker

2:45 Greeting the participants in the museum lobby

3:00 Discussion starts: welcoming the participants and explaining the ground rules

3:07 Introduction (remotely)

3:15 Buzzing in pairs

3:20 Joint dialogue

3:50 Selecting a theme to focus on

3:55 Joint dialogue

4:40 Writing down personal insights

4:45 Sharing personal insight with others

4:55 Thank you and debrief

Despite the timed schedule, the template is flexible, and the facilitator shouldn't stop a good discussion because of it. However, it's important to stick to the end time and conclude the dialogue a bit early rather than go overtime.

Example Invitation

Hi,

Are you interested in how AI and technology will change our everyday life in the future? Will we spend our time in Metaverse as our digital twins while AI and automation do our work? Or can advancing technology offer us better tools for advocacy, more free time, and a chance to focus on what we care about the most? What would your ideal future look like?

Join the discussion and share your thoughts in the Timeout dialogue on **Wednesday 30th October from 4 to 6 pm.** in the collaborative space Kupla at the Vapriikki Museum Centre in Tampere. An anonymised summary of the dialogue will be given to the Tampere Smart City team and sent to participants.

We hope to welcome participants from all age groups. You don't need any prior information on the subject, as we invite you to participate, share your thoughts, and listen to others. Feel free to forward this invitation to anyone who might be interested.

The dialogue is for a maximum of 10 participants, so **please let us know if you are** able to attend as soon as possible by emailing us [insert email] or calling [phone number]. We will be providing snacks and drinks and a free ticket to the museum centre as a thank you for participation.

The Timeout dialogue is about the participants sharing their thoughts and experience. The goal is not to find the truth or reach a consensus. The important thing is that everyone learns something new about their own and others' experiences. Every dialogue has a facilitator to ensure that the discussion is equal and that the atmosphere is constructive.

We follow the safer space principles of the collaborative space Kupla [link to the safer space principles].

Personal data is processed in accordance with our privacy notice [link to privacy notice].

More information on Timeout dialogues:

[Links to the Timeout Foundation's website and Finnish Postal Museum's event page].

Welcome!

GENERAL TIPS FOR ORGANISING A DIALOGUE

- Think of some questions on the topic to support the discussion. Sometimes participants just answer the facilitator's questions instead of discussing between themselves. In these cases, you can direct the participants to take up someone else's comment (for example by asking if anyone else has similar experiences) instead of asking more questions. You can also pick questions from the ongoing discussion; this makes them fit in better with it.
- Decide how closely you want to direct the discussion to follow the plan. Spontaneous discussion is positive, but sometimes it's better to direct the participants back to the original topic. After all that's what they signed up to discuss. It's good to have some kind of direction you are taking the dialogue towards. For example, discussions on AI and technology tended to turn to painting negative views of the future, so it was good to have some positive questions to steer the discussion towards hope and people's own agency.
- Don't worry about quiet moments! It's good to have some quiet phases in the dialogue, so the participants can reflect on the topic. Not every minute needs to be filled with words.
- Keep the schedule flexible but stick to the end time. It's not useful to follow the schedule by the minute and to stop the discussion on one theme just to move on to the next. However, don't postpone the end and wrap up on time. You can offer the participants an option to continue the discussion but also to leave earlier.
- Provide nametags and let the participants write their own names (first name is enough). Don't assume you know what name a participant prefers.

- Ask the participants to say their names once you sit in a circle, so you can write them down for yourself in the same shape they are sitting in. During the discussion, make a mark next to the person's name when they speak. This helps you keep track of who is talking a lot and who might need to be encouraged to participate.
- Decide if you want to offer something in return for participating. Do you want the participants to sign up because of a reward or the dialogue itself? The Postal Museum gave free tickets to the Museum Centre.
- Tell the participants that you may ask if they want to say something, but they can always say no.
- One of the biggest challenges is finding people who would otherwise not participate in discussions. You can welcome them and try to reach out to them, but no-one can be forced to participate. Even if hearing insights and experiences from different people is enriching, you should remember that, for example, people who are members of visible minorities may feel a pressure to represent the whole group. Similarly, other participants may assume one participant represents the whole community even if the facilitator emphasises that everyone only represents themselves. Consider these things in advance in order not to contribute to minority stress and stereotypes

Partners Are an Advantage

As you can read in the articles on the Timeout dialogues in the Museum of Finnish Architecture²⁴ and The National Museum²⁵, collaboration with different parties is a great help in organising dialogues. The same was true of organising the dialogues in this project. Finding and contacting participants one by one and getting them to sign up is much more difficult and time-consuming than sending an invitation out to a group through a contact. With partners, you can also organise dialogues that benefit everyone. Because inviting participants is the most time-consuming part of organising a dialogue, any help is welcome. After all, you can't have a dialogue without participants.

Knowing the sender may also play a role in accepting the invitation. If the invitation comes from a person you know, it is harder to ignore. That's why associations, societies, teachers, and hobby groups are good bridges for inviting people you wouldn't reach through search engines and who might not participate otherwise. Notably, younger participants are far easier to reach through contacts. After participating in one dialogue, people will hopefully be more open to join in again and to spread the word.

In this project, collaboration also meant participating in the National Dialogues in the spring of 2024 and the Well Said Discussion Festival in the autumn of 2024. In both cases, while we took care of promotion and invitations, the dialogues were also promoted in the event programmes. However, the biggest help was the support for the events provided in, for example, coaching. Tips and insights from experienced discussion organisers and others participating in the events were helpful in planning later dialogues.

We also organised one dialogue at the Tampere City Library's civil participation day event Tekoja!. The discussion on everyday technology of the future was planned together with the Smart Tampere team, who also received a copy of the summary. In this way, the dialogues benefited the partners and not only the museum.

Connecting Dialogues to the Museum's Other Activities

To make organising a Timeout or another dialogue in the museum meaningful, it should give something to both the museum and the participants. Timeout dialogues can be organised in other places besides museums, but during the project we tested some ways of combining museums and dialogues.

Dialogues may provide ideas for the museum's activities. For example, we found ideas for our future main exhibition through the dialogues. Nevertheless, the dialogue shouldn't only benefit the museum, because even if supporting the museum's activities may motivate some participants, it probably won't motivate

24 <https://www.mfa.fi/museo-dialogissa/>

25 <https://www.eratauko.fi/kansallismuseo/>

enough people to attend a discussion in the museum. A museum's strength as a venue lies in its concept of time: museums deal with past, present, and possibly even the future, and these timelines can be made part of the dialogues arranged therein. Immaterial cultural heritage, historical perspective, and social impact are part of the changing role of museums underlined in especially the concept of the dynamic museum²⁶.

The introduction can be a short, even a guided tour of an exhibition pointing out topical questions. In this project, we tested this twice in both the Riding the Radio Waves exhibition and A Good Person – Why Does the Holocaust Affect us too? exhibition. Both exhibitions offered a chance to discuss topics that are still relevant today and that it's good to pause to reflect on. Nostalgia, memories, concern about the global situation and the polarisation of public debate were all discussed in the dialogues. The groups also got to choose which exhibition they wanted to discuss.

Linking the past, present, and future doesn't necessarily require an exhibition. Museum objects, photos or audio files can also function as a bridge between different times. This helps the museum visitors, and dialogue participants to look at the exhibition with new eyes after thought-provoking dialogue on the exhibition or parts of it. Materials from the past may prove to be surprisingly resonant in the present; connecting generations and bringing the museum collections closer to the visitors of today. For example, the difficulty of picking up the phone touches surprisingly different generations. The introduction to the Let's stay in touch! dialogue was an excerpt from a school radio programme from 1963. The whole episode is available in the Riding the Radio Waves exhibition, but as an introduction we chose an excerpt explaining how to answer a landline phone. The participants of all ages seemed to share the anxiety around calling and answering the phone, especially since modern phones make it possible to communicate with images and messages, making calling less of a necessity. This brought back memories from past decades linking the experiences of different generations and sparking discussion.

Different Types of Participants

We all have our own way of participating in discussions. The Timeout Foundation's website offers materials for reflecting on your own way of participating²⁷ and on how to take different language users into account in the dialogues²⁸. These are absolutely worth visiting. However, language competence might not be the only challenge in the dialogue: it's important to also involve visually impaired people, sign language users, and members of other minorities in the discussions. Moreover, it's important to ensure that everyone can fully participate in the dialogue as themselves without being seen as a representative of a certain group. You should take this into account both when sending the invitations and during the dialogue.

26 Paaskoski & al. 2022

27 <https://www.timeoutdialogue.fi/tool/acting-as-a-participant-and-listener-in-a-discussion/>

28 <https://www.timeoutdialogue.fi/tool/different-language-users/>

A good rule of thumb is not to assume anything. It's best to ask visually impaired participants about their needs and preferences. For example, would it be helpful if everyone described themselves before starting the dialogue or that the participants said their names before speaking? Every visually impaired person has their own preferences. Everyone is different, so don't be afraid to ask.

It may be more difficult to steer other participants' attention away from a visible minority status. The facilitator can remind the participants in the beginning of the dialogue that everyone represents themselves and talks about their personal experience and not on behalf of an organisation or a community or because of their characteristics. Naturally, there may be exceptions if the participants are invited to represent a certain group. These types of dialogues have been held for example between a discriminated group and the dominant group, but this changes the nature of the dialogue²⁹. The participants need to know in advance if they are invited to such a dialogue. While discussion, dialogue, and storytelling may be used, for example, to process recent conflicts³⁰, this requires careful planning by the facilitators.

Two types of participants that occur in almost every discussion are quiet and dominating participants. The Timeout Foundation offers tips for these situations as well^{31 32}. Explaining the facilitator's role makes dealing with them easier. When everyone is on the same page, it's easier to encourage the quiet participants, knowing that the more enthusiastic ones will not be hurt. The more diverse the group, the more likely it's to form unrecognised power structures and domination even if it isn't anyone's intention. For example, young and shy participants may find it very hard to speak among older and more experienced speakers. This is why the facilitator must acknowledge both. By doing so, the facilitator also reassures the enthusiastic participants that they don't need to wonder whether they are speaking too much. The facilitator will ensure that everyone gets a say if they want to. The facilitator should also remind the participants in the beginning that they don't need to say anything if they don't want to, even if they are offered a turn.

29 Arao & Clemens 2013

30 Glendinning 2011

31 <https://www.timeoutdialogue.fi/tool/activating-the-quiet-participants-in-the-discussion/>

32 <https://www.timeoutdialogue.fi/tool/if-someone-dominates/>

5. Lessons Learned from the Dialogues

Even though the Timeout Foundation offers good tips and guides, organising dialogues can only be learned by doing. We practised by organising dialogues for our colleagues at the Postal Museum before moving on to a wider audience. Organising many different types of dialogues during the project made it possible to test and hone new approaches. Regarding the topics, universal ones were easy in a way, but it was difficult to target them to a specific group. The ‘something for everyone’ approach doesn’t make it easier to decide whom to invite to the dialogue.

As a rule, the participants were interested in the dialogue and participated because of that. Museum staff also used their personal contacts to invite people they knew. However, the dialogues reached a surprisingly wide array of participants and seemed to foster understanding between generations, for example, on digital communications and living in a digital world. Pleasingly, universal topics also elicited many different experiences. This was hard to foresee when the topic was as universal as life in a digital world. When inviting participants, it was hard to tell who felt anxious about digitalisation, who didn’t use social media at all, and who depended on their mobile device, for example. Unless, of course, the person had talked about their stance publicly. However, the experiences proved to be more diverse than expected and even people with similar opinions might offer completely new points of view.

Current Kupla proved to be a good concept because it offered an opportunity for less organising beforehand and for participants to join during the dialogue. However, this only worked in practice during the winter holiday week, because otherwise there weren’t enough visitors to Kupla who had time to join the dialogue on the spot. The winter holiday week was an exception because the museum had more visitors. Then, Current Kupla worked as planned. Realising this type of pop-up dialogue seems to require a more central venue or more visitors in the museum. One option would be to organise the pop-up dialogue by inviting some participants in advance but to keep the discussion open for new participants to join. Also, a short, guided tour of the exhibition with a discussion of the thoughts provoked by it functioned as an easy to organise dialogue.

The museum stored several pages of notes for each dialogue; four to seven pages per discussion. These are meant to give insights for the next main exhibition. Because digitalisation is a constantly current topic that concerns many different parties, the museum will also share the notes with other parties who might benefit from them. Notes from all dialogues organised during the project were sent to Sitra. In addition, notes from some dialogues will be used in decision-making. These include, for example, the discussion organised as part of the National Dialogues and the dialogue on technology of the future organised together with the Smart Tampere team. This gives the Tampere city project staff the possibility to read

the notes to gain insights on what the inhabitants of the city think of everyday technologies.

Facilitating the dialogues also offered the museum staff new insights and a different kind of contact with visitors. Organising dialogues felt meaningful even if it was time-consuming. Organising dialogues with this frequency and depth required about half of the working hours of a full-time employee. This included planning, coordinating, promoting, and facilitating the dialogues, inviting participants, meetings with partners, and various trainings offered by the National Dialogues and the Well Said Discussion Festival.



Insights from Dialogues

Reflections on marginalisation, the development of digital technology, the generation gap, and feelings of insecurity recurred throughout the dialogues. However, participants also found themes that inspire trust even in the digital age. Attempts were made to intentionally include hope and desirable futures in the dialogues, because discussions on technology easily veer towards insecurity and undesirable futures. The dialogues themselves were often seen as one of the hopeful signs: discussing and sharing thoughts on difficult topics gave hope and trust that people can still gather, discuss, and find shared experiences. We may not be able to stop the change, but we can come up with small deeds that bring about the desired future. The dialogues also proved that we can still part from our phones, as many participants said that two hours went fast, and they didn't even feel the need to check the time.

In this section, we have collated the recurring themes from the dialogues and discussions on them.

Digital Marginalisation

Marginalisation and being left behind by digitalisation were recurring themes in the dialogues. Using digital tools and services requires skills, and many services have given up alternatives or they have been made difficult to access. Digital services are often aimed at the 'average citizen', and people's different needs are not considered enough. Services that are very important for some groups, such as the text phone service for people with impaired hearing, are discontinued due to a lack of funding. This reduces people's ability to act independently. Also, elderly people may not get enough training in using apps and devices and things are done on their behalf. However, seniors should also have the right to choose what devices and services they use. Participants also pointed out that even the so-called digital natives don't necessarily know how to conduct official business online even if they are fluent with the devices used. The users shouldn't need to accommodate the digital services, but rather the services should be customised to serve the users. The feeling that nowadays people serve technology instead of the technology serving people also emerged in the dialogues.

Beside involuntary digital marginalisation, the dialogues also touched on staying out of the digital world voluntarily. Finland doesn't officially require citizens to participate in the digital world, but it's simply easier to manage things digitally as face-to-face services are reduced and customer service is centralised to the extent that it's often impossible to contact a specific store instead of the centralised customer service of the brand in question. The participants pointed out that face to face service options should be made available if using digital services is not mandatory.

Inequality and the Ecological Footprint of Digitalisation

Participants reflected on the materials used on the devices: they come from foreign countries where the working conditions may be life threatening, but the locals may not have the option to use digital devices themselves. In other words, convenient digital services are available to those who aren't risking their lives to provide the materials for the devices. In short, the digital society is based on global inequality. Global inequality was also discussed in relation to the environmental impact of the digital platforms: we have very little information available on how digital platforms like cloud computing, email, and websites use natural resources. However, it's clear that the Earth's resources wouldn't allow everyone to use digital tools and platforms as much as we now use them in the West. We know more about the environmental impact of manufacturing devices, but it's more difficult to quantify the emissions of digital platforms. In this context, participants also raised the question of who is responsible for the ecological footprint of our digital life: providers of digital services, the government, or the consumers? They concluded that everyone has their own responsibility, and even if a single consumer isn't able to do much, it's better to do something than nothing.

More Efficient Work with AI?

Artificial intelligence was discussed in almost every dialogue, mostly how it can or can't be used at work. The use of AI caused concern and confusion especially in relation to creative fields: AI can be used for creative tasks, but the participants pointed out that generative AI isn't actually creative and produces rather dull content. Creating something original with AI requires work and skill. However, AI can be helpful in producing informative texts, such as newsletters. This was deemed helpful especially for small business owners who must do their own marketing without the support of an expert to find clients.

The participants also discussed whether using AI is genuinely more efficient. For example, it's used in film editing, but does it actually save resources? AI might produce worse quality and less original content than a human, and if the costs are cut who does it benefit? The participants were also asked when does using AI feel like cheating. How would you feel if you learned that the book you just read was written by AI? According to the dialogues, if AI is used in a task or creating content, it should be mentioned openly.

Media, Distrust, and Newsfeed

The current media landscape was a theme in many dialogues. The flood of constantly updating news often felt exhausting and the distrust towards news felt taxing. The increase in fake news, misinformation, and disinformation led the participants to worry whether anything can be trusted in the future. However, they also noted that critical thinking was already essential before the current digital news era. Nevertheless, nowadays AI makes it easy to create seemingly real fake news and distribute it through social media. Participants also worried that even if they feel media literate themselves,

other might trust fake news. This seemed to be both worrying and scary. Another common concern was losing the ability to recognise fake news. Hope was directed at young people: they learn fast in the digital world, so maybe they will also learn healthy criticism towards media. The importance of empathy was also reflected on. Polarisation and believing in fake news were seen to result from people's discomfort and different concerns. When other people or media point out different concerns than the ones the person worries about, they might feel fake or untrue.

Different Communication Styles and Being Available 24/7

Nowadays, having our phone always in our pocket makes us constantly available for calls and messages. People have developed different communication styles: some prefer calling and others messaging, and some message before calling. The participants discussed different communication styles and the importance of communicating one's own style to others. Being available 24/7 seemed to give a feeling of safety, for example because children can be reached easily, and they can also call if something is wrong. At the same time, availability felt difficult because it covers both work and free time. Participants pointed out that it's good to dare to be occasionally out of reach. For example, leaving one's phone at home caused worry at first but then felt liberating.

Power of Tech Giants

The power of tech giants emerged in the discussions as a cause for concern among other things. For example, many social media platforms are owned by these tech giants. People spend time on various social media platforms, and the organisations behind them aim to maximise the time users spend on them. Phones and especially social media offer our stone age brain fast rewards hooking us easily. Meanwhile, for example businesses must be present on social media, where algorithms, the platforms' community guidelines, and paid ads affect their customer flow. Businesses that provide digital services were also discussed from an ecological point of view: they should disclose how much natural resources the services use. However, they might not be motivated to do so, because they want people to use the services more rather than less. Social media platforms were also seen to have positive effects, for example they make staying in touch with old friends easier.

Hope and Future

Although fears emerged in the dialogues regarding technology and digitalisation, there was also hope expressed for a better future. The participants hoped that technology would make life easier so that people would have more time and resources to do things they like. Digitalisation has made many things easier and, even if it poses some threats, the participants also mentioned hope in relation to tackling those threats. They also believed in increasing empathy, encounters, and humanity. At this point, digitalisation has moved at an incredible speed, and new laws are constantly drafted to make technology more transparent and safer to use.



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