

CASE STUDY: RESPONSE BOARDS TO DIALOGUE DAYS, ONE SMALL STEP IN NORTH LIBERTY

Overview

North Liberty Library serves a community of roughly 22,000 people outside Iowa City, in a region where local politics and state politics often feel at odds. Adult Services Librarian Nick Shimmin had already experimented with dialogue models through organizations like Living Room Conversations and Braver Angels, but found that for him many approaches did not translate cleanly into a library setting.

When North Liberty Library joined the One Small Step Libraries Initiative, Nick saw an opportunity to design programming that fit the library's role as a public, nonpartisan space. To add to his current bridgebuilding programming, he built a pair of offerings that moved from passive reflection to active dialogue practice, allowing community members to engage at different levels.



Approach

Nick developed two primary OSS-inspired offerings: a community response board and an in-person dialogue workshop focused on listening skills.

He began with a monthly response board prompt displayed in the library:

“How would you explain to a child what your dream of a more unified country looks like?”

Community members submitted responses both in person and online. Staff lightly curated submissions and displayed them anonymously on the library's interior windows, creating a visible, ongoing presence for reflection inside the building.

The people of our country would work together to make the United States a better place for all of us to live.

- N. I.

Building on that foundation, Nick hosted an in-person workshop centered on a listening technique called **Looping for Understanding**. Participants were introduced to One Small Step framing and practiced reflecting, clarifying, and digging deeper using OSS questions related to values and beliefs. The emphasis was on listening accurately rather than persuading or debating.



Recording conversations was not a goal of either program. The focus remained on skill-building, reflection, and real-time connection.

Key Insights & Lessons Learned

Nick observed a clear difference between passive and active engagement. While the response board generated thoughtful submissions and visibility, the in-person workshop created deeper connections by giving people a structured way to practice listening with one another.

He also noted how much participants valued having a moderator and clear process. Looping techniques helped slow conversations down, reduce reactivity, and keep exchanges grounded in personal experience rather than assumptions.

“We, as librarians, can provide guides and moderators to make sure those conversations are safe”
-Nick Shimmin, North Liberty Library Adult Services Librarian

Space and materials mattered as well. Nick found that future workshops would benefit from a larger room and more printed reference tools so participants could easily follow along during practice.

My dream is that one day, we all respect the inherent dignity and worth of every human and that we respect the personal choices others make for themselves, even if they are not choices we would make. I would explain that freedom of religion and speech is our right and privilege and not meant to be weaponized.

- D. R.

Notable Outcomes and Key Takeaways

Participants consistently described how unusual it felt to be listened to without interruption. One attendee remarked on “how rare it is to have someone completely pay attention to you.” Another shared that looping reduced emotional defensiveness and increased curiosity.

A conservative participant said it was the first time in years she felt able to speak openly with liberal neighbors without fear of judgment. Several attendees stayed after the workshop to continue talking informally, and some remained in touch afterward.

Nick's experience reinforced the role libraries can play as conveners for skill-based dialogue. With clear structure, approachable tools, and trusted facilitation, community members were willing to engage more openly than he initially expected. As Nick puts it:

"Be fearless. I worried a lot about people getting into big arguments. The reaction has been really the opposite. There have been tears sometimes, but usually there are more hugs."

Project Links:

-  **North Liberty Library.mp4**

ONE SMALL STEP powered by StoryCorps

One Small Step brings people with different views together to record a conversation — not to debate politics — but simply to get to know each other as people. In this event, we are looking at a concept of Mirroring or Looping to better understand and talk to one another.

1. Welcome and Introductions (~10 minutes)

Each participant has 1 minute to introduce themselves.

- Share your name and something you wish other people knew about you

2. Event Agreements: (~5 minutes)

- **Be curious and listen to understand.** In this session, we'll be focusing heavily on active listening as the most important part of communication. Every person has a unique background that can provide you with a new view on the world around you.
- **Speak for yourself and about your own experiences.** You do not represent an entire political party or group of people.
- **Show respect and suspend judgment.** People tend to judge one another. Setting judgement aside opens you up to learning from others and makes them feel respected and appreciated. Try to truly listen, without interruption.
- **Be authentic and welcome that from others.** Share what's important to you. Speak from your experience and emotion. Be considerate of others who are doing the same.

3. Parts of Looping (w/ Video) (~10 minutes)

- **Active Listening:** It is vital to be truly listening without planning your response while the other person is speaking.
- **Reflecting:** Reflect back the speaker's message. Use phrases like:
 - "It sounds like you're saying..."
 - "What I hear you saying is..."
 - "So, you feel that..."
- **Clarifying:** Ask follow-up questions to ensure understanding and to delve deeper:
 - "Can you tell me more about that?"
 - "Did I get that right?"
- **Dig Deeper:** If you have gotten to the point of significant clarity, ask questions to gain further understanding.
 - "Can you tell me more about..."

4. Demonstration (~10 min)

5. Practice (~40 min)

We're going to spend some time practicing the process of looping in the realm of personal beliefs in political issues and tough topics.

Round One: (~10 min)

- What brought you here today? What interests or occurrences in your life make events like this important to you?

Round Two: (~10min)

- Could you describe, in your own words, your personal political values

Round Three: (~10min)

- Have your political leanings affected your relationships with friends or family?

Round Four: (~10min)

- What heated political issue do you understand to be more complex than partisan arguments? How would you describe your personal take on that issue?

6. Reflecting on the Conversation (~15 min)

- Share your experience and reflections on the practice sessions.
- What difficulties did you find as you practiced?

7. Feedback (~10 min)

- What feedback or advice would you give for implementing this in other locations. What would you add or remove from the process.

Thank you!

**** One Small Step Online – visit northlibertylibrary.org/oss ****

This case study highlights programs adapted from One Small Step toolkits. Visit diy.takeonesmallstep.org to explore the tools.