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SOCIAL

A Silly Debate for Serious Problems

Freestyle Social: A Silly Debate for Serious Problems

Science is the greatest thinking tool humanity has ever developed. To preserve and maintain this tool we must understand the cognitive barriers to scientific thinking and build social tools to help overcome them.

In short, we can build a wiser society through science culture. Freestyle Social events work towards this goal by encouraging flexible thinking in a format that allows people to challenge their assumptions and encounter new ideas.

This guide provides detailed tips and instructions on how to host your own Freestyle Social event.

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1. What is a Freestyle Social?

Freestyle Social is a social tool for flexible thinking.

Science requires new ways of thinking, but people can get stuck in old ones.

Freestyle Social helps us get unstuck by providing people the social architecture to think flexibly and

imaginatively about our future. Our goal is to build a culture of awe, wonder and curiosity through conversations about our possible futures.

It's not about what people think - it's about how! Our goal is less about changing minds on a specific topic, and more about practising changing our minds in general.

The world needs flexible thinkers. Flexible thinking takes practice. We aim to help.

At a Freestyle Social people will think critically about where society is headed, without realizing it's science.

2. Why Host a Freestyle Social?

THE PROBLEM - our culture is currently facing an intolerance of uncertainty, failure and vulnerability. In this environment people can be reactionary and close-minded. In short, people get stuck in ways of thinking.

THE SOLUTION - to provide space, tools and incentives for people to practice the antidotes to these ills - curiosity, collaboration, calm and courage!

In a successful Freestyle Social event, participants will:

Practice Curiosity!

It's all too easy to shrink away from, avoid or discount the unknown. When we are curious we are more open to new ideas, and more willing to actively seek out new approaches. Thinking speculatively allows us to explore potential outcomes, allowing us to more fully consider all the options before us and to make better decisions. Flexible thinkers ask "what if?".

- Ask questions like “what might our future look like?” “How do I think it should look?” “How do we think it should look?” “Why do people see things differently than me?”
- Explore and question assumptions about the world.
- When confronted by a new idea, be willing to wonder “If they’re right, how might the world look?”

Practice Collaboration!

We all have blind spots in our thinking that are, by definition, invisible to us. The best way to find blind spots is by talking to people who see things differently. Collaboration is one of the core pillars of good science, and any good conversation incorporates many perspectives. So, every event actively searches for perspectives the public might not ordinarily take. **Collecting a diversity of perspectives is the goal.** Flexible thinkers collaborate.

- Exchange ideas with people who think in dramatically different ways.
- Enrich your understanding by discussing your perspective and those of other people
- Disagree playfully
- Drive collective conversations about our future, citizen-to-citizen

Practice Calm! (Take being silly seriously)

A good thinker can laugh at flaws in someone else’s ideas; A better one can laugh at flaws in their own. Flexible thinkers build the capacity to laugh at themselves. It’s what we mean by “calm” and it’s indispensable to an ability to scientifically refine our ideas. Every event is carefully formatted with this in mind.

- Recognize when emotion is shaping your beliefs
- Practice noticing when ideas feel “threatening”
- If you notice you feel this way, practice asking “why?”
- Be comfortable with being uncomfortable/uncertain.

Calm transforms fear into curiosity.

Practice Courage!

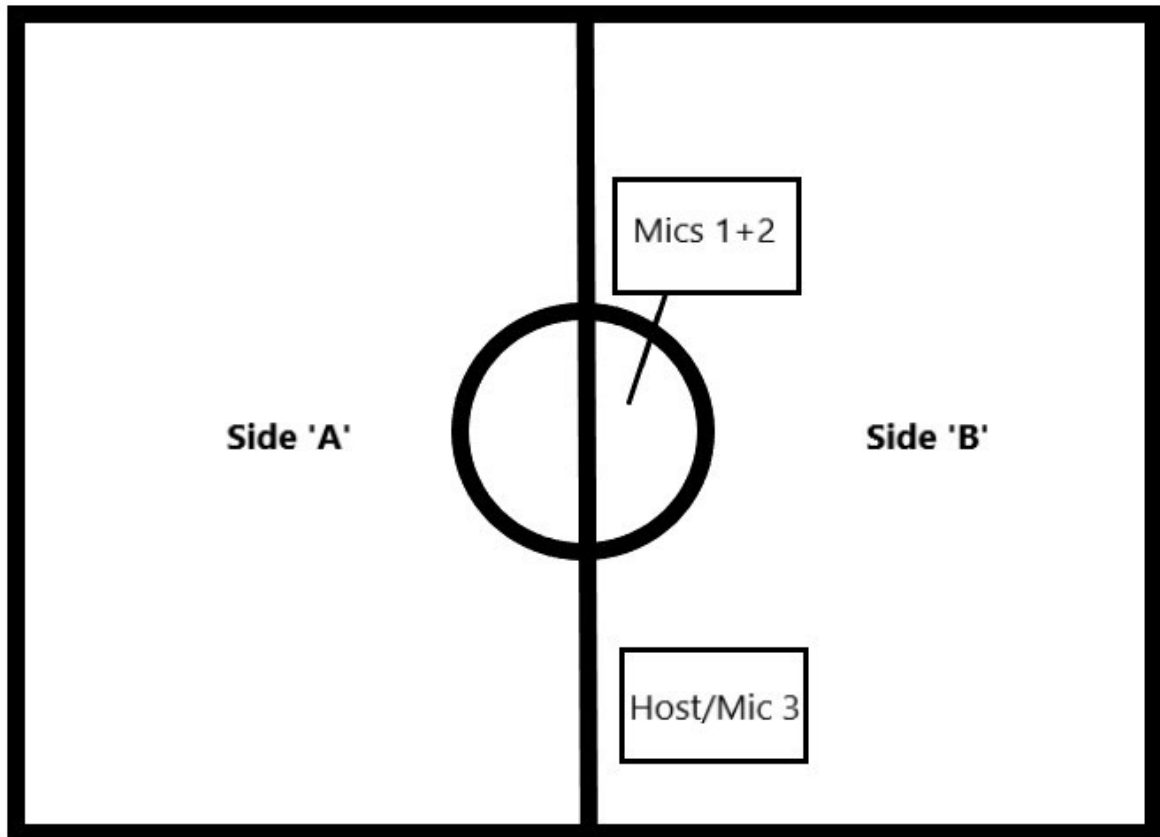
Changing your mind is inherently scary. It requires that we choose to walk into emotional exposure and uncertainty. That also happens to be our definition for courage. This value is the hardest to live by. It takes courage to go against your friends, admit you were wrong, and to listen to people you disagree with.

- Step into uncertainty and say “I don’t know!”
- Follow the data, even if it leads to some weird places.
- Remind yourself you can do hard things.
- Change your mind, even if you’ve held a belief for a long time.

3. What You need to Host Your Own Freestyle Social

- **An open space where people are able to move freely**
- **A line of tape placed on the floor to divide the room**
- **1 or 2 Microphone and microphone stands placed in the centre of the line. The central and shared position of speaking box has a big part to play in setting a tone where different ideas can have equal voice.**
- **A microphone (wireless ideal) for the moderator**

Example Freestyle Social Layout



4. How it Works

In a nutshell, put tape down the middle of the floor to divide the room, and then the moderator starts asking 'spark' questions. The audience has 10 seconds (per question) to pick a side and then persuade those on the other side to switch.

Freestyle Social is hosted by a moderator who guides the discussion and keeps the mood light and friendly. The discussion starts and ends when you like, though in our experience, discussion

should last between 20 - 40 minutes (depending on the energy level of your group), with between 6 -12 questions discussed.

Participants have unlimited opportunities to speak, but should try to keep each point to 30 seconds. There should only be one person speaking at a time, to ensure all perspectives in the room receive attention and respect (a good microphone really helps here).

People should switch sides several times as new persuasive ideas arise.

When the clock runs out on each question, the distribution of people in the room will express what your segment of society has to say about the question they faced!

The Rules

1. Say your piece

We assume people selected the side they did for a good reason. It might even be a reason the other side hadn't thought of (a blind spot). Everyone benefits by hearing new perspectives.

2. Change your mind

If you hear an idea that makes you say "Hmm. I'd never thought about things that way", you should suspend your judgement, change your mind and walk across to the other side. People will admire your courage.

3. Change your mind (again)

We really encourage flip-flopping because the questions you'll be asking are complex. Looking at complicated issues from as many perspectives as you can gives you your best shot at finding and correcting for your blind spots.

Example questions

- Should we make computers smarter than people?

- Would you edit your genes?
- Would you eat bug burgers?

5. Role of the Host

The Host will act as a moderator of the discussion, making sure everyone has an equal chance to make their voice heard, ensuring a friendly atmosphere is maintained, and prompting new avenues of discussion as necessary. The majority of your responsibility is in managing and directing the attention of the room to help people transform fear into curiosity.

The host will:

- Warm up attendees, and introduce the topic of the evening.
- Role-model behaviour in the Freestyle Social by finding the value in well-made arguments.
- Pay special attention to the emotional responses of participants.
- Interject if speakers do not stay within the allotted time - keep the conversation dynamic!
- Interject with humour about positions you hold/have held
- Have a reflection at the end of every freestyle social. Ask people who have changed their minds about their experience. How did it feel?
- After the formal Freestyle Social has ended, encourage attendees to continue the discussion as they wish.

6. Tips and Tricks for Moderating:

Perspective Diversity is the Goal

An expert opinion can add a lot of depth and knowledge to any given topic of discussion. Expert perspectives should be valued, but must participate on an equal level with all other participants. Accordingly, experts should be encouraged to approach topics with the same open mindedness

and willingness to change their minds as all other Freestyle Social attendees, and should be given no priority to speak.

Keep it light!

Blending thought-provoking and challenging questions with downright silly and absurd questions helps lighten the mood to relieve tension, and also reminds participants to laugh at themselves.

Keep it Topical!

The nature of Freestyle Social allows the conversation to be adapted to current events or news, or to make curriculum connections. This format was developed to encourage insightful and reflective conversations that would welcome people to consider the active role they play in the future of the society we all share.

Audio Matters!

Making sure your microphones are working makes a big difference in your ability to direct and manage the attention of the room. If people can't hear what other participants are saying, they get bored and lose interest. That's not to say that everyone has to be listening constantly (a wondering mind *can* mean they're deeply engaged with the question) but if they want to hear new ideas they should be able to.

Do Your Homework!

From time to time there will be questions that heavily skew your participants one way or another. In these instances it is really helpful to know enough about both sides of an issue that you could make a reasonable argument from that side. Your goal here isn't to change minds, just help provide additional perspectives that your audience might not have considered. Ideally people on either side of an issue will be less sure of their perspectives.

Freestyle Social has been developed by Science Everywhere, an organization that works to build inclusive science culture for a better future.

About Science Everywhere

Science Everywhere is an events and media company.

We build social tools for better thinking.

To us, **science is not what you think; It's *how***. An approach to thinking that requires creativity and intuition, perspective-taking and flexible thinking, braving the unknown and standing on the shoulders of giants.

Science is the most powerful thinking tool we've got.

Our mission is to help society sharpen it. In our 25+ years in science engagement, we've found this requires five values: **Curiosity, Collaboration, Calm, Creativity and Courage**. We aim to foster these values in everything we produce.

Curious? Ask questions!

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