

# Six Tips for an Accessible Online Dialogue

The use of online communications tools in dialogue has the potential to be a powerful, accessible tool for meaningful engagement on social issues.

DIALOGUE ONLINE is not simply chat-rooms filled with bad grammar and emoticons. Organizations are beginning to recognize and use online communications tools to bring remote participants together to engage in dialogue about important issues. Well executed dialogue events have the ability to create a sense of shared purpose, foster understanding of complex problems, and energize a community around an issue. The same goes for dialogue that takes place online. Online dialogue, however, has a few different concerns and pitfalls that do not apply to live, in-person dialogue events. Here are a few tips to keep in mind when organizing your own online dialogue:

- 1. CHOOSE YOUR SOFTWARE CAREFULLY.** Many online communications programs claim to have all the answers. However, accessible dialogues are different from your typical corporate meeting. The dialogue software you choose should be compatible with major adaptive technologies, such as text readers and live captioning. It should also be affordable and easy for the average person to use.
- 2. FIND A GOOD FACILITATOR.** An experienced facilitator who is comfortable with the technology involved can guide the discussion so that the participants stay focused and productive.
- 3. TRAIN YOUR PARTICIPANTS WELL.** Your participants need to be familiar with the online dia-

logue software, and the dialogue concept. A short and simple information package and a training session, if needed, should suffice. Try to make contact with your remote participants by phone rather than just by email—the personal connection will help to keep everyone on board.

- 4. GET TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE FROM SOMEONE WHO KNOWS ABOUT ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY.** You need to find someone who is not only familiar with the routine technical problems, but also the needs of people who use assistive technologies.
- 5. MAKE IT ACCESSIBLE.** You can depend on the Internet's ability to give a voice to many who were previously unheard. Live captioning and instant messaging can make the dialogue software more accessible for participants with hearing impairments or language difficulties. Make sure that materials are available in Braille and plain text formats, and do not refer to too many images during the dialogue.
- 6. MAKE IT SIMPLE.** This applies to all aspects of project planning, but especially to online dialogues. It is easy to be over-enthusiastic or tempted to bite off more than you can chew with the different "add-ons" to the software. However, you don't want to alienate your participants with too much technical complexity, and the dialogue will be more worthwhile if people can explore one topic in depth, rather than skim the surface of many issues. ■