

# Generative Dialogue Lab – White Paper



## Executive Summary

The Generative Dialogue Lab (GDL) at Utrecht University (UU) responds to the urgent challenges of cultural fragmentation, democratic decay, and systemic crisis by cultivating generative dialogue as a core capability within higher education and research.

*Generative dialogue* refers to conversations that generate positive outcomes like increased relational trust between people and new insights, learning, and perspective-shifts. Though such dialogue does not magically resolve the stark conflict in positions that have come to characterize contemporary society, it does have a subtle but profound *culture changing potential*: rebuilding the social fabric while opening hearts and minds.

This White Paper presents a comprehensive framework for embedding generative dialogue at Utrecht University through four mutually reinforcing pillars:

1. developing dialogical capabilities (Education);
2. fostering a dialogical campus (Culture);
3. supporting dialogical institutional change (Systems); and
4. advancing research for and through dialogue (Research).

By emphasizing dialogue as a relational, ethical, and transformative practice, the Lab promotes deeper learning, connection, and meaning making among students and staff, while aligning with the university's strategic commitments to high quality education, excellence in science, societal impact, and institutional inclusion and sustainability.

The Lab's approach bridges pedagogy, policy, and scientific inquiry, recognizing that dialogue must be nurtured within supportive structures and both practiced and studied to realize its full potential. Ultimately, the GDL envisions UU as a *pioneering dialogical university* – one that enacts the inclusive, responsive, and collaborative qualities needed to thrive in an increasingly complex and existentially challenged world.

## **Introduction**

### ***1a. Why a Generative Dialogue Lab (GDL) at Utrecht University (UU)?***

We live in a time of psychological, cultural, geopolitical, and ecological upheaval. Our societies face escalating challenges – from climate disruption to cultural fragmentation, from democratic decay to declining mental health. Yet just as our problems demand collective insight and cooperation, our ability to have constructive conversations with one another – especially across lines of difference – is rapidly deteriorating.

Polarization, distrust, and fragmentation are symptoms of a system under profound strain. They reflect, *and* reinforce, a breakdown of shared meaning and mutual understanding – the civic glue that holds pluralistic democracies together. While our complex challenges require participatory problem-solving, our public discourse too often collapses into adversarial debate, ideological tribalism, and zero-sum logic.

This is where the *GDL* at UU comes in. This Lab is grounded in the conviction that we must break the vicious cycles of polarization, distrust, and fragmentation – and that generative dialogue is a key to turning them into virtuous cycles of connection, insight, and renewal.

Research underscores this idea. For example, studies in social psychology have shown that when people receive high-quality attentive listening, they tend to self-reflect on their positions, often resulting in a depolarization of their viewpoints.<sup>1</sup> Such studies show that something as simple (though not necessarily easy) as truly listening, may function as a *game-changer* in how a difficult conversation unfolds: rebuilding trust instead of shattering it, and softening positions rather than hardening them.

Universities, with their diversity of disciplines, perspectives, and people, offer a fertile ground to explore how we might unlock the profound potential of generative dialogue. They are not just places of knowledge production, but crucial arenas where students, scholars, and citizens learn how to live with difference, question their assumptions, explore new ways of thinking, and advance innovative solutions. In this light, dialogue is not only a democratic and educational necessity but also a promising potential.

UU has already taken steps in advancing dialogue. The *Open Minds* Comenius project<sup>2</sup>, the *Centre for Academic Teaching & Learning's* trainings, and initiatives around well-being, social safety, and transformative learning all reflect a growing awareness that dialogue is an essential capability in today's world. The ambitions of the *Equity, Diversity & Inclusion Office* and the *Institutions for Open Societies* similarly point to the need for spaces that support pluralism, civic learning, and inclusive institutional culture. Yet despite these efforts, we as a community still struggle to engage in difficult conversations with openness, confidence, and care. The escalation of student protests illustrates how hard it can be to hold space for principled disagreement without descending into moral condemnation or mutual distrust.

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<sup>1</sup> See: Itzchakov, Guy, Netta Weinstein, Mark Leary, Dvori Saluk, and Moty Amar. 2024. "Listening to understand: The role of high-quality listening on speakers' attitude depolarization during disagreements." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 126 (2): 213-239.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nwo.nl/en/projects/40523865718>

The GDL builds on these efforts by creating a research-informed, university-wide space dedicated to the pedagogy, practice, embedding, and research of generative transformative dialogue. Our aim is to strengthen the university's capacity to hold complexity, support social sustainability, and foster the dialogical capabilities so urgently needed at our time of existential, planetary challenge.

At stake is more than just the quality of campus conversation. Dialogue – as we understand and practice it – is a foundation for social resilience, epistemic humility, and democratic renewal. It is how we learn to stay in relationship across difference, how we surface tacit assumptions and unexamined worldviews, and how we generate shared insight in the face of complexity. As such, the GDL is not only about reducing polarization – it is about creating the conditions for deep, systemic transformation, both within the university and far beyond its walls.

### ***1b. What is generative dialogue?***

At its core, dialogue is not just about exchanging arguments or negotiating positions, but about *thinking together in relationship* — a process of shared inquiry that invites us to explore the assumptions beneath our views while being open to the perspectives of others. We have therefore defined *generative dialogue* as conversations that enable a respectful exchange of perspectives, enhance relationships, and produce novel insights. Rather than aiming to persuade or defeat, generative dialogue cultivates the conditions for inquisitive exploration, mutual understanding, and creative learning.<sup>3</sup>

In a generative dialogue, participants are supported to listen to one another, to reflect in a non-defensive manner, and to explore beyond their existing frame of reference. Such conversations support individual and collective learning, not by pushing toward consensus, but by expanding the space in which new connections — between people, perspectives, and possibilities — can emerge. As such, generative dialogue holds the potential to be transformative: helping us to freshly understand ourselves, work through tensions, and co-create responses to the urgent challenges of our time.

Importantly, generative dialogue is not just a means to an end – it is a meaningful end in itself. While it often produces valuable outcomes like trust, insight, and collaborative momentum, its core lies in the quality of presence, attention, and the mutual transformation it fosters. These intrinsic qualities are foundational to healthy relationships and institutions, yet often overlooked when dialogue is treated merely as a tool for reaching solutions. Generative dialogue thus invites us to value connection, inquiry, and meaning-making as inherently worthwhile — while trusting that such spaces naturally give rise to more thoughtful and inclusive forms of action and change.

This approach to generative dialogue builds on a growing body of literature and research in educational theory, social psychology, and organizational learning, amongst others, as well as a range of emerging dialogical practices. At UU, we have already begun to experiment with such practices — for instance, through the development of

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<sup>3</sup> See this study currently under review: [Facilitating Generative Dialogue. The Design of a Practice that Fosters Constructive Conversations, Democratic Capabilities, and Transformative Learning](#)

conversational methods like *Het Vlak*<sup>4</sup> and the *Stream-of-Consciousness Dialogue*.<sup>5</sup> Initial results show promising impacts, including increased openness to diverse perspectives, greater self-awareness, and enhanced relational connection. In this sense, generative dialogue is not only a theory or ideal, but a developing capability — one we can learn, apply, research, and refine across university life.

### **1c. How does generative dialogue strengthen UU's strategic goals?**

Generative dialogue is not an add-on to the university's mission but a vital enabler of it. UU has positioned itself as a "place for new collaborations and cross-pollination" where "shared perspectives are the source of tomorrow's solutions." It has emphasized the importance of social sustainability; of equality, diversity, and inclusion; of the need for interdisciplinary collaboration on complex global challenges; and of the ambition to educate students for responsible societal engagement in a changing world.<sup>6</sup>

Research shows that both *cognitive diversity* (differences in knowledge, heuristics, perspectives) and *demographic diversity* (identity-based differences) can improve problem-solving, innovation, and research impact. Classic work shows that groups with varied heuristics and perspectives can outperform groups of the "best" like-minded individuals on complex problems.<sup>7</sup> Research also shows that scientific impact tends to rise with demographic diversity.<sup>8</sup> The underlying mechanism appears to be that diversity expands the pool of information and perspectives and pushes teams to examine assumptions — often yielding more accurate decisions and creative solutions.<sup>9</sup>

Yet these benefits can only be realized when people are able to navigate difference constructively. Crucially, teams need *psychological safety* – an atmosphere that allows people to speak up, disagree, and explore half-formed ideas – and processes that ensure ideas are integrated. The GDL supports this by advancing dialogical capabilities campus-wide – like deep listening, perspective-taking, and undefensive self-reflection – while also working to foster a more dialogical campus culture and institution.

The ability to navigate diverse perspectives is also crucial in education. Arguably, higher education should be *the* place where different viewpoints can be constructively exchanged<sup>10</sup> and where friction between them is embraced as *educational opportunity*.<sup>11</sup> That is, considering diverse views can create new ways of thinking and insight; bring

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<sup>4</sup> [https://teaching-and-learning-collection.sites.uu.nl/learning\\_activity/het-vlak-in-dialoog-over-complexe-onderwerpen-met-behulp-van-objecten/](https://teaching-and-learning-collection.sites.uu.nl/learning_activity/het-vlak-in-dialoog-over-complexe-onderwerpen-met-behulp-van-objecten/)

<sup>5</sup> [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=5294502](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=5294502)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.uu.nl/en/organisation/strategic-plan-2025/the-strategic-plan>

<sup>7</sup> Hong, Lu, and Scott E. Page. 2024. "Groups of diverse problem solvers can outperform groups of high-ability problem solvers." *PNAS* 101 (46).

<sup>8</sup> Freeman, R. B., and W. Huang. 2014. "Collaboration: Strength in diversity." *Nature* 513 (7518): 305.

<sup>9</sup> Phillips, Katherine W. 2014. "How Diversity Makes Us Smarter." *Scientific American*.

<sup>10</sup> Inspectie van het Onderwijs, NVAO. (2021). Gezamenlijke notitie persoonlijke ontplooiing en maatschappelijk verantwoordelijkheidsbesef in het hoger onderwijs. Rijksoverheid.

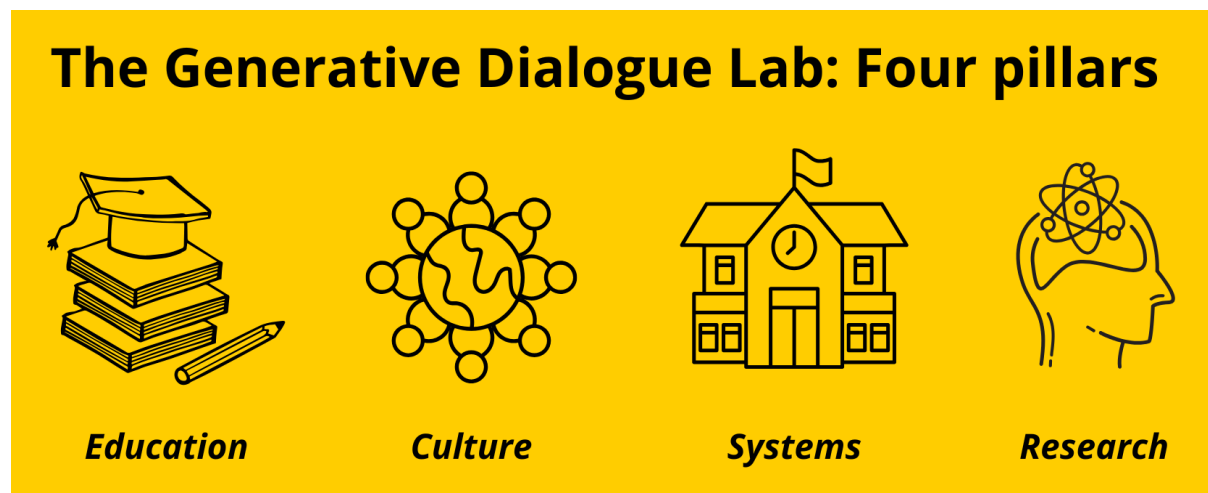
<sup>11</sup> See Parra, Saro Lozano, Cok Bakker, and Lucien van Liere. 2021. "Practicing democracy in the playground: turning political conflict into educational friction." *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 53 (1): 32-46. And: Wansink, Bjorn Gert Jan, Jacob Timmer, and Larike Henriette Bronkhorts. 2023. "Navigating Multiple Perspectives in Discussing Controversial Topics: Boundary Crossing in the Classroom." *Education Sciences* 13, no. 938.

societal problems into the classroom; broaden students' worldviews; and prepare them for their future roles in an increasingly diverse world.<sup>12</sup> The Lab's dialogue efforts may also help students overcome loneliness and alienation, while fostering a sense of *belonging*, which research has shown to support academic performance.<sup>13</sup>

Lastly, generative dialogue speaks to a deeper democratic calling. In times of systemic strain and institutional distrust, universities have a crucial role to play: not only as producers of knowledge, but as cultivators of the democratic cultures needed to live and work well together in pluralistic societies. By supporting dialogue, UU strengthens its commitment to being not just an excellent research and educational institution, but also a learning community that contributes to a more just, inclusive, and sustainable world.

## **2. The Generative Dialogue Lab's fourfold purpose**

The GDL's mission is grounded in a fourfold purpose, each addressing a vital aspect of fostering generative dialogue within the university. These interrelated, mutually reinforcing pillars work together to build dialogical capabilities (education), cultivate a dialogical campus (culture), support institutional transformation (systems), and advance inquiry and innovation (research). Together, they form a comprehensive framework for embedding generative dialogue as a core capability for social sustainability, transformative education, democratic renewal, and scientific excellence at UU.



### **2a. Supporting dialogical capabilities development – Education**

If dialogue is foundational to a healthy, thriving university, then dialogical capability must be a core educational and pedagogical aim. Dialogical capability – the ability to listen deeply, think in relationship, hold tension without premature closure, and co-create meaning across difference — is a cross-cutting skill. It underpins inclusive

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<sup>12</sup> De Witt, Annick, Margien C. Bootsma, Brian Dermody, and Karin Rebel. 2024. "Designing Transformative Interventions for a World in Crisis: How the 'Worldview Journey' invites for personal, cultural, and systems transformation." *Environmental Science & Policy* 162.

<sup>13</sup> Verbree, Anne-Roos, Marieke van der Schaaf, Leoniek Wijngaards-de Meij, and Gönül Dilaver. "Students' sense of belonging and authenticity in higher education." *British Educational Research Journal* n/a (n/a).

education, interdisciplinary collaboration, and democratic engagement. Yet it is rarely cultivated in a conscious, sustained, or research-informed way.

The GDL addresses this gap by proposing an integrated, university-wide approach to dialogical capabilities development, including:

- *Pedagogical innovation*: Supporting educators to embed generative dialogue in their teaching through teacher training and the development of a teaching toolkit.
- *Student learning pathways*: Creating opportunities for students to practice dialogue as part of both formal and informal education.
- *Staff development*: Helping teachers, researchers, and policy professionals strengthen their dialogical capacities through workshops and other practice- and learning opportunities.

This approach builds on dialogue practices piloted at UU, including the *Stream-of-Consciousness Dialogue Practice* and *Het Vlak*. These practices have already demonstrated the potential of generative dialogue to foster openness to diverse perspectives, enhanced relational connection, and novel insight<sup>14</sup>, thus strengthening epistemic humility, civic imagination, and deeper engagement with complexity.

Pedagogically, our approach is grounded in educational theories that emphasize relational and transformative learning. *Transformative learning theory* holds that meaningful learning often involves a shift in perspective, emphasizing not the acquisition of knowledge but the evolution of the learner's frame of reference.<sup>15</sup> Through critical reflection on one's assumptions, values, and worldviews, learners expand how they see themselves, others, and the world.<sup>16</sup> By fostering dialogical skills that support openness, self-reflection, and perspective-taking, the Lab helps cultivate conditions where such deep, often challenging, learning can take place. This in turn enables personal growth while enhancing our collective capacity for innovation, empathy, and social renewal.

Crucially, we do not treat dialogue as an interpersonal nicety but frame it as a *civic-pedagogical capability*: a foundational capability that enables students and staff to navigate pluralism, think critically with compassion, and co-create inclusive and innovative academic cultures. In this way, generative dialogue directly supports UU's strategic goals in education — from interdisciplinary, challenge-based learning to preparing future change agents in a diverse, complex, interdependent world.

## **2b. Fostering a dialogical campus – Culture**

While dialogue is a capability we can learn, it is also a culture we must co-create. At UU this means building a climate in which people feel safe, curious, and empowered to engage across difference – not just in classrooms, but throughout university life. A dialogical campus is one where disagreement is not suppressed but surfaced with care;

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<sup>14</sup> See: [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=5294502](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=5294502).

<sup>15</sup> See: Mezirow, Jack. 1997. "Transformative Learning: Theory to Practice." In *New Directions For Adult and Continuing Education*. CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers. And: Mezirow, Jack. 2003. "Transformative Learning as Discourse." *Journal of Transformative Education* 1 (1): 58-63.

<sup>16</sup> For a concrete example of a learning intervention facilitating such deep reflection, see: De Witt, Annick, Margien C. Bootsma, Brian Dermody, and Karin Rebel. 2024. "Designing Transformative Interventions for a World in Crisis: How the 'Worldview Journey' invites for personal, cultural, and systems transformation." *Environmental Science & Policy* 162.

where different worldviews are not silenced but explored with curiosity; and where students and staff alike are invited to practice democracy in everyday ways.

Such a culture requires visible practices, skilled facilitation, institutional support, and above all: spaces where the messy, meaningful work of dialogue can happen. To cultivate such a culture, the GDL aims to:

- *Build a community of practice*: Hosting regular, open dialogical spaces where students and staff explore real-world tensions as opportunities for shared learning and institutional reflection, including monthly 'Break your Bubble' (ByB) sessions.
- Co-create (experiment, research, refine) *dialogue methods* that support inclusive engagement across a range of contexts and settings.
- Educate and *empower other stakeholders* within the university, including students and staff to host their own dialogues.
- Work with existing initiatives across UU to build *collective ownership* of a more dialogical academic community.

In doing so, we aim to create a visible and inviting presence on campus — one that signals, in word and deed, that dialogue matters. Whether through informal lunch dialogues, community assemblies, or creative methods of co-reflection, the Lab will provide fertile ground for new forms of encounter, sensemaking, and relationship. Empowering the university community to engage in difficult conversations with openness and curiosity is key to strengthening social cohesion, trust, and a shared sense of belonging. Such a dialogical campus culture also supports mental health and well-being by enabling genuine connection and providing constructive ways to navigate conflict and difference. It contributes to a socially sustainable, resilient university environment that can better adapt to complex global challenges.

### **Example: A Generative Climate Dialogue at Utrecht University<sup>17</sup>**

In one of the Lab's early events<sup>18</sup>, a diverse group of students and staff engaged in a generative dialogue on the climate crisis. The dialogue was structured around multiple carefully designed prompts to support deep reflection and authentic expression. Rather than starting from debate or argument, participants were invited to share their inner experiences, thoughts, and emotions related to climate change in an intimate setting of a well-structured one-to-one conversation.

The dialogue used the *stream-of-consciousness dialogue* method, allowing participants to speak in turn without interruption or direct response, thereby creating space for deep listening and attentive presence, as well as fuller expression of one's experience and thought, following the spontaneous 'flow' in the moment. This approach revealed a rich range of responses: from frustration and grief to hope and commitment, alongside reflections on agency, responsibility, and collective action. Participants reported that the experience allowed them to connect with themselves and others in new ways, opening up relational and emotional dimensions not often accessed in typical climate discussions.

The event demonstrated how generative dialogue can cultivate the needed trust and mutual understanding needed for creative collaboration — supporting the Lab's mission to foster a dialogical campus culture that embraces complexity, pluralism, and civic engagement. It also highlighted compelling avenues for future research: as participants noted how quick a sense of intimacy and trust had emerged, they raised the question of whether this approach might prove effective – or even transformative – in settings marked by deep polarization or conflict. This is a question the GDL indeed aspires to explore further in future studies.

### **2c. Inviting for dialogical institutional change – Systems**

A university is not only a site of learning and research but also a living institution shaped by complex systems, policies, and governance structures. For generative dialogue to truly flourish and have lasting impact, it must move beyond individual and community-level practice to influence how the university organizes itself – its decision-making processes, leadership cultures, and operational norms.

The GDL thus aims to invite the university community to engage in dialogical institutional change, proposing a reflective, participatory approach to evolving the systems and operations that undergird campus life. This approach recognizes that institutional norms and structures both shape *and* reflect how dialogue is experienced (or limited) in practice. By intentionally cultivating dialogical principles at the systemic level, UU can become a more adaptive, inclusive, and democratic organization.

Specifically, the Lab aims to:

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<sup>17</sup> See [Why generative dialogue is a surprisingly simple answer to some of today's toughest problems](#) for a more expanded description of this climate dialogue, from the perspective of one of the dialogue's moderators.

<sup>18</sup> This climate dialogue was organized by Open Minds in collaboration with DUB, and two different methods were used to explore the topic of climate change: The stream-of-consciousness dialogue practice and het Vlak.

- *Create spaces for reflective dialogue* with institutional stakeholders, including leadership, administration, faculty, and students, focused on key challenges such as inclusion, sustainability, academic integrity, and governance.
- *Develop dialogical leadership frameworks and training*, equipping university leaders with the capabilities to listen deeply, navigate complexity, and foster cultures of trust and co-responsibility.
- *Collaborate with key units across the university*, such as Human Resources, Equality, Diversity & Inclusion, Sustainability, and Wellbeing, to embed dialogical values into policies, routines, and institutional narratives.

Institutional transformation through dialogue is inherently a dynamic and iterative process rather than a fixed outcome. The Lab envisions itself as both a partner and catalyst: partnering with those already engaged in change efforts while catalyzing new questions, relationships, and possibilities.

In embracing dialogical institutional change, UU can nurture an environment where difficult questions are welcomed, diverse perspectives are heard, and the institution evolves in response to the needs and aspirations of its members. Such systemic embedding of dialogue is essential for the university to navigate complexity with resilience, foster social sustainability, and live out its democratic and educational mission in a rapidly changing world.

## ***2d. Advancing inquiry and innovation – Research***

At its heart, the GDL is a space of inquiry, with dialogue not only to be practiced and taught, but also to be studied, tested, and refined. As such, the Lab aims to contribute to a growing field of research that explores the conditions, impacts, and possibilities of generative dialogue — both within higher education and in broader societal contexts. Generative dialogue raises compelling research questions, like:

- What kinds of dialogical methods are most effective in different settings?
- How do they influence trust, insight, or collaborative capacity?
- What internal and relational dynamics emerge during deep dialogue?
- What role can dialogue play in addressing polarization, institutional change, systemic crisis, or worldview transformation?

To pursue these questions, the Lab supports *research for dialogue* (e.g., studies that design and refine dialogical practices and evaluate their outcomes), as well as *dialogue for research* (e.g., participatory, co-inquiry-based methods where the research process itself is dialogical). We also recognize dialogue as a form of inquiry in its own right — a way of knowing that complements more conventional modes of academic reasoning. Specifically, the Lab aims to:

- *Pilot dialogical methods*, evaluate their impacts, and explore their social and educational potential, including ones that have emerged in the UU context, like the Stream-of-consciousness Dialogue practice and Het Vlak.

- *Advance interdisciplinary research collaborations*, connecting scholars interested in dialogue, (transformative) learning, democracy, conflict transformation, social sustainability, and epistemic justice.
- *Build bridges between research and practice*, by facilitating action research and reflective inquiry among facilitators, students, staff, and partners.
- *Document and share insights* through publications, working papers, and public events, contributing to both scholarly and societal conversations.

In this way, the GDL not only supports a more dialogical university — it also contributes to a deeper understanding of dialogue itself as a transformative social, educational, and epistemic practice.

Ultimately, this research agenda reinforces the Lab’s broader mission: to cultivate a university community that is not only capable of dialogue, but curious about it — willing to ask what makes dialogue work, what it makes possible, and how it can help humanity navigate the complexity, plurality, and existential challenges of the 21st century.

### **3. Clarifying educational ethics, institutional context, scientific relevance**

To embed generative dialogue meaningfully within the university, it is essential to clarify its underlying educational ethics, understand its fit within institutional frameworks, and recognize its scientific relevance. This section explores these three interrelated dimensions, which together create a robust foundation for the Lab’s work.

#### ***3a. How to dialogue? The pedagogy and ethics of dialogue***

If generative dialogue is to become a meaningful capability within the university, we must take seriously the pedagogy and ethics that underlie it. Dialogue cannot be reduced to a method or technique; it is a relational and ethical practice that invites for particular forms of attention, presence, and care. As such, cultivating generative dialogue requires intentional design, skilled facilitation, and commitment to the conditions that make such encounters possible.

The pedagogy of dialogue begins with a shift in stance: from a transactional view of communication (convincing, debating, informing) toward a deeper vision of learning as relational and potentially transformative. In this view, dialogue is not merely a means of exchanging information or resolving differences, but a practice of mutual presence and co-creation, where learners are invited to examine their assumptions, listen across boundaries, and encounter otherness in ways that may change them.

Drawing on *relational learning* (which emphasizes the intersubjective and contextual nature of knowledge) and *transformative learning* (which involves questioning and reshaping one’s underlying frames of reference), generative dialogue creates conditions for learning that is not only intellectual, but personal, moral, and developmental.

This means that dialogical learning is also a practice of *ethical engagement*. It asks participants to take responsibility for their perspectives, to remain open in the face of difference, and to hold space for ambiguity and tension. It also asks facilitators and

educators to be attentive to dynamics of power, inclusion, and safety — recognizing that dialogue is always situated in broader social and institutional contexts.

The GDL is committed to developing practices that are pedagogically sound and ethically robust. This includes:

- Developing principles and formats that support psychological safety, epistemic humility, and inclusive participation;
- Training facilitators who are equipped to guide complex conversations with skill, sensitivity, and reflexivity;
- Collaborating with educators and curriculum designers to ensure that dialogical approaches align with educational goals and student development;
- Continuing to reflect on the ethical dimensions of dialogue, including issues of voice, representation, and the risks and responsibilities of speaking and listening.

In this sense, the GDL is not just advancing new methods but contributing to a broader shift in how we understand learning and community in higher education. It invites a reimagining of *the university as a dialogical space*: one in which knowledge is co-created, relationships are strengthened, and learning involves the transformation of self and society.

### **3b. How to institutionalize? UU policy frameworks and guidelines**

For generative dialogue to flourish at UU, it must be institutionally recognized, resourced, and embedded within existing policies, strategies, and organizational practices. While dialogue is inherently emergent and relational, it cannot be sustained at scale without systemic support and institutional commitment.

UU recognizes the importance of dialogue in several key frameworks:

- UU's *Strategic Plan 2025–2030* emphasizes the university's role in contributing to a just, sustainable, and open society, and calls for "active engagement with society" and "interdisciplinary collaboration" that fosters new ways of thinking and working together.<sup>19</sup>
- UU's *educational vision* highlights "dialogue and openness to different perspectives" as core to academic development, while promoting inclusive learning environments where students and teachers learn with and from one another.<sup>20</sup>
- The *Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) programme* underscores the need to create spaces for conversation and reflection, where people feel seen, heard, and valued — a foundational condition for generative dialogue.

The GDL aligns with and builds upon these institutional commitments by offering tools, practices, and learning pathways that can help bring this ambition into daily educational, organizational, and strategic practice. This includes:

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.uu.nl/en/organisation/strategic-plan-2025/the-strategic-plan>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.uu.nl/en/education/educational-vision>

- Supporting the integration of dialogue into teaching and curriculum design, in line with UU's commitment to "education that matters" and relational learning;
- Designing and facilitating institutional dialogues around sensitive or strategic themes, thereby contributing to reflexive organizational development;
- Contributing to frameworks for leadership and team development, where dialogical capability is vital for inclusive, effective, and adaptive leadership;
- Co-creating guidelines and principles with policymakers and staff to support ethical and inclusive dialogue across contexts — especially where power dynamics, institutional histories, or social tensions are at play.

To institutionalize generative dialogue is not to standardize or bureaucratize it, but to create the enabling conditions in which dialogical practices can flourish — through policy, leadership, funding, facilitation, and a shared understanding of its value. This includes embedding dialogue into UU's strategic processes: not just using it as a means of communication, but as a mode of governance, decision-making, and co-creation.

In doing so, UU can position itself as a pioneering university that does not only teach about change but enacts it dialogically — modelling the kind of inclusive, responsive, and participatory institutions we need in today's complex and challenged world.

### ***3c. How to research? Research for dialogue, and dialogue for research***

Research plays a crucial role in advancing generative dialogue — both by improving our understanding of dialogue itself and by using dialogue to enhance research processes. We therefore distinguish two complementary orientations:

*Research for dialogue* focuses on studying dialogue and dialogue practices. This includes investigating how dialogue can support us to address urgent social challenges. For example: *How can dialogue help reduce social polarization and build shared understanding across deeply divided perspectives?* Such questions point toward a broader agenda joining conflict transformation, peacebuilding, conflict mediation, deliberative democracy, education, and organizational learning, grounding UU's dialogue work in established scholarship while pushing its frontiers.

*Dialogue for research* refers to using dialogue itself as a methodological and collaborative tool within research projects. Generative dialogue can foster interdisciplinary collaboration, deepen reflexivity, and help researchers co-create more meaningful and nuanced research questions and designs. This approach encourages a more participatory, integrative, and relational form of knowledge production — one that is well-suited to the complex, systemic challenges UU aims to address.

Going forward, the GDL seeks to develop and support research initiatives that explore one or both dimensions. This includes piloting dialogue interventions in polarized university or societal contexts and studying their effects longitudinally, as well as embedding dialogue methods in interdisciplinary research collaborations. By doing so, UU can contribute to advancing the scientific understanding of dialogue and demonstrating its transformative potential in real-world settings.

## **4. Outlining Activities and Timeline**

### ***4a. Imagining a Vibrant Generative Dialogue Lab***

A thriving GDL at UU will be a dynamic hub where dialogue is both practiced and studied across disciplines, roles, and communities. Success for us means a university culture where generative dialogue is a lived, shared value — embedded in education, research, and institutional life. It looks like:

- Students and staff regularly engage in dialogue sessions that foster curiosity, openness, and mutual respect, even on challenging topics.
- Dialogue skills become integral to curricula and professional development.
- The Lab acts as a catalyst for ongoing institutional reflection and adaptive change, partnering with leadership and key units to embed dialogical principles in policies and governance.
- Research on dialogue flourishes, producing insights that inform practice and contribute to global knowledge on constructive engagement in polarized contexts.
- The Lab's impact extends beyond UU, influencing other universities, civil society, and policy circles eager to cultivate dialogical capacities for democratic renewal.

### ***4b. Initiatives in the 2025-2026 Academic Year***

To realize this vision, the GDL will launch a suite of interconnected initiatives:

- Offering monthly dialogue events: Hosting 'Break your Bubble' sessions on timely themes, accessible to the wider UU community.
- Creating an active community with engaged members.
- Developing a teacher/facilitator toolkit for educators wanting to integrate dialogue into their education.
- Developing a pilot facilitator training focused on generative dialogue theory and practice, tailored for students and staff.
- Creating a facilitator pool of trained facilitators that can host dialogues.
- Experimenting with multiple dialogue methods while evaluating their impacts.
- Initiating collaborative research on dialogue methods, their social and educational impacts, and how dialogue can enhance research design and collaboration.
- Connecting with existing initiatives (e.g. EDI Office, Wellbeing programs, student organizations) to build partnerships and amplify dialogical culture campus-wide.

### ***4c. Becoming Involved***

The GDL is not a closed circle but an open invitation. Whether you are a student eager to deepen your capacity for generative dialogue, a teacher seeking new pedagogical tools, a researcher interested in exploring dialogue's potential, or a staff member passionate about fostering a more inclusive workplace or campus — there is a place for you here.

Ways to get involved include:

- Signing up to our Teams environment and/or the quarterly Generative Dialogue Lab newsletter to learn about events and trainings, developments and research.
- Participating in dialogue sessions and workshops.
- Contributing to pilot research projects or educational design.
- Leading or facilitating dialogue initiatives within your faculty or community.
- Sharing ideas, feedback, and experiences to shape the Lab's growth.

Together, we can co-create a culture of dialogue that supports learning, innovation, and social resilience across the university.

#### ***4d. Creating Continuity Over Time and Scaling Impact***

Sustaining the Generative Dialogue Lab's momentum requires intentional strategies to embed dialogue into UU's long-term fabric. This includes:

- Institutionalizing the GDL through integration into UU's strategic plans, budgets, and governance structures.
- Building a network of dialogue practitioners and champions across faculties and departments to share resources and best practices.
- Establishing ongoing evaluation and research mechanisms to track impact, learn, and adapt.
- Exploring external partnerships with other universities, civil society organizations, and funders to expand the Lab's reach and influence.
- Cultivating a community to continue dialogue practice and advocacy beyond UU.

By committing to these pathways, the GDL can become a lasting and evolving force for dialogical capability and democratic vitality — locally and globally.

#### **5. Conclusion**

The GDL represents a vital investment in the future of UU and higher education more broadly. At a moment marked by societal fragmentation, democratic erosion, and systemic crisis, the capacity to engage in deep, generative dialogue is more than a desirable skill – it is a foundational capability for building resilient communities and institutions.

By integrating dialogical practices into education, campus culture, institutional processes, and research, the GDL offers a holistic response to the challenges facing universities today. This approach invites us to rethink what it means to learn, lead, govern, and conduct research in a pluralistic society, emphasizing curiosity and co-creation over polarization and isolation.

Realizing this vision will require sustained commitment, collaboration, and ongoing reflection. Yet the potential rewards – greater social cohesion, innovation, and democratic vitality – are profound. UU can lead by example, demonstrating how dialogue can be a powerful force for positive transformation within and beyond the academy.