

Street Epistemology

A Method for Exploring Beliefs Through Civil Conversation

This is an extension of our What Works to Build Mental Immunity series. Thus far, the series has focused on conceptual tools for teachers, however, this article and additional articles in this series are designed for a more general audience.

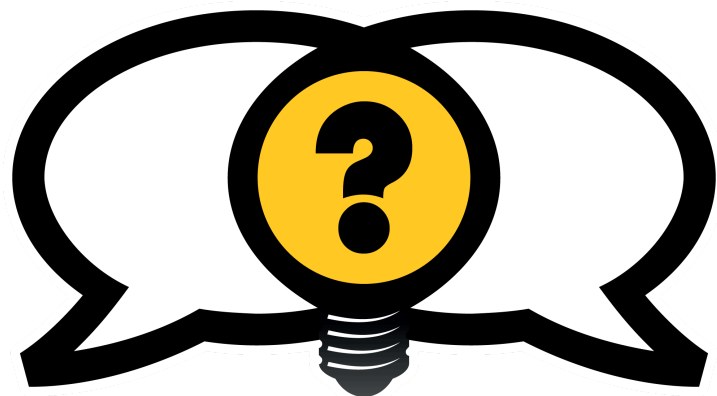
Street Epistemology (SE) is a conversational approach designed to help people critically reflect on the quality of their reasoning through civil dialogue. Developed as an open-source concept, SE has evolved into a broader movement focused on fostering more rational and thoughtful discussions about beliefs.

The primary goal of Street Epistemology is to encourage critical reflection in ourselves and others. Critical reflection is the deliberate process of considering something deeply and thoroughly, with an openness to the possibility of being wrong. By engaging in SE conversations, practitioners aim to help others (and themselves) become better critical thinkers, potentially leading to more accurate beliefs and wiser choices.

Why Use Street Epistemology?

There are several compelling reasons to learn and practice Street Epistemology:

1. **To understand others better:** SE emphasizes truly grasping the intended meaning behind someone's beliefs and reasoning.
2. **To encourage critical reflection:** By asking thoughtful questions, SE helps people examine their beliefs more rigorously than they might on their own.
3. **To improve critical thinking skills:** Practicing SE hones one's ability to analyze arguments, identify assumptions, and evaluate evidence.
4. **To maintain or grow relationships:** SE techniques can help navigate disagreements about sensitive topics like politics or religion more productively.
5. **To contribute to a more rational world:** By raising the general level of rationality, SE may help decrease dogmatism and improve communication in society.



Street Epistemology Logo

The Steps of Street Epistemology

A typical Street Epistemology conversation follows these key steps (although it doesn't have to be so rigid):

Pre-Conversation Considerations

Before starting, reflect on your goals, ethical considerations, and mindset. Prepare yourself to approach the conversation collaboratively rather than confrontationally.

Establish Rapport (Step 1)

Build a civil, authentic, comfortable atmosphere to create psychological safety for your conversation partner. This is crucial for reducing reactance and maintaining productive dialogue.

Identify and Clarify Claim (Step 2)

Work with your partner to narrow down the topic to one well-defined claim they consent to discuss further that is clear, concise, and important.

Identify Confidence Level (Step 3)

Ask your partner to rate their present feeling of confidence in the truth of their claim on a spectrum (e.g., 0-100). This allows for a more nuanced exploration of beliefs.

Identify Main Reasons (Step 4)

Discover the primary reasons supporting your partner's confidence in their claim. Isolate and focus on the reasons that most impact their belief.

Evaluate the Quality of Reasoning (Step 5)

Explore the epistemology (quality of reasoning) behind their reasons. Ask questions to check for alternative explanations, relevance, strength of inference, falsifiability, etc.

End the Conversation (Step 6)

Conclude the discussion at an appropriate time, such as after a moment of deep reflection or when progress has been made. Recap key points and thank your partner.

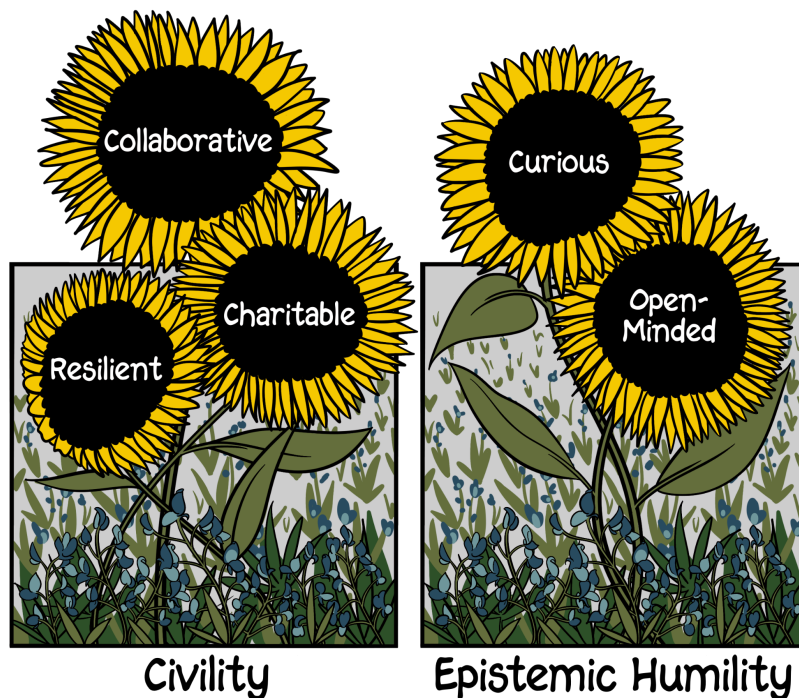
Post-Conversation Considerations

Reflect on the conversation, considering what went well and what could be improved for future SE interactions. Discuss with others who practice street epistemology for feedback and growth.

Main Qualities of Street Epistemology

Several key aspects make Street Epistemology unique and effective:

1. **Focus on quality of reasoning:** SE examines how people arrive at their beliefs rather than just debating the beliefs themselves. Exploring “process” instead of challenging “conclusions” productively shifts the dynamic.
2. **Collaborative, not confrontational:** The approach emphasizes working together to explore ideas rather than trying to “win” an argument. A great mindset to cultivate.
3. **More asking, less telling:** SE practitioners primarily ask thoughtful questions rather than presenting their own views. But you can make it a back-and-forth if necessary.
4. **Use of confidence scales:** Viewing belief on a spectrum allows for more nuanced discussions and easier tracking of changes in confidence. This framework “allows” people to shift on their beliefs without having to painfully drop anything cold turkey.
5. **Science-minded:** The process mirrors aspects of the scientific method, such as generating hypotheses and seeking disconfirmation. But never over the heads of those involved—Street Epistemology is accessible and easy to learn and implement.
6. **Accounts for psychological and social motivations:** SE recognizes that belief formation and maintenance are influenced by more than just evidence or logic. Psychological and social factors also drive the confidence in the truth of our claims and can be successfully incorporated into your exploration.



Graphic on “Having the Right Mindset” from [SEI's Navigating Beliefs course](#)

What Works to Build Mental Immunity by [CIRCE](#)

Conclusion

Street Epistemology offers a structured yet flexible approach to having more productive conversations about beliefs. By focusing on understanding, encouraging critical reflection, and maintaining a collaborative spirit, SE practitioners aim to improve both individual critical thinking skills and broader societal rationality.

Whether your goal is to better understand others, improve your own reasoning, or contribute to a more thoughtful world, Street Epistemology provides valuable tools for navigating the complex landscape of human beliefs.



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