

Talk about Tough Issues

Politics and gender, race and religion, health care and war—our country is divided over many important issues. In classrooms and broader communities, we need productive dialogue.

Dialogue is a way of talking and listening to create shared understanding. In dialogue, we withhold judgment. We discover that our world view includes assumptions that we take for granted. We explore our assumptions rather than defend them. The goal is not to get everyone on the same page, but to appreciate where everyone is coming from.

When you plan a dialogue or participate in one, this guide can help. First, review what we mean by dialogue. This front page is an introduction. Then, use the guide on the reverse side. The back page is a step-by-step guide, along with some tips. Dialogue will not solve all of our conflicts, but it is a way—a peaceful way—to build understanding.

What is Dialogue?

DIALOGUE IS A SAFE SPACE

We meet each other as equals around a round table.

We agree to keep an open mind.

We investigate our assumptions about the truth.

We aim for understanding each other rather than agreement.

DIALOGUE IS THE OPPOSITE OF DEBATE

Debate

A battle of words
Speak to persuade
Defend assumptions
Compete to win
Listen to criticize
Just the facts
Present evidence
Question my opponent
Knows one answer
Decided by the judge

Dialogue

A flow of shared meaning
Speak to express myself
Explore assumptions
Cooperate together
Listen to understand
Affirm the feelings
Share personal experience
Question myself
Investigate multiple answers
Left open-ended

DIALOGUE IS FOLLOWING SHARED GUIDELINES

Set aside distractions.
Use “I” statements.
Take turns talking.
Convey respect.
Listen with empathy.
Withhold judgment.
Explore disagreements.
Allow remaining silent.
Respect confidentiality.
What would you add?

How Do We Dialogue?

Dialogue can happen in small groups or large ones. Whether planned weeks in advance or spontaneous, productive dialogue shares some common practices. If you're leading a dialogue, review the steps for getting started. Consider using the sample questions in the order provided. The various tips will help along the way. Remember that our goal is not agreement or ending conflict, but simply to understand each other. A good dialogue is a great place to start.

➔ Getting Started

1. Sit in a circle.
2. Talk about expectations for dialogue (*see reverse side*).
3. Slow down the conversation.

➔ Ask Dialogic Questions

1. What makes this issue hard to talk about?
2. What is most important about this issue for you?
3. What experiences in your own life have shaped your views?
4. What do you admire about those with a different perspective?
5. What unresolved tensions or mixed feelings remain in your own view?
6. What questions do you still have to explore in your thinking about this issue?
7. What did you appreciate discovering in today's dialogue?

Tips for the Facilitator

- Monitor your own reactions.
- Articulate shared concerns.
- Talk about the tensions that arise.
- Remind participants of the guidelines.
- Name the voices or views left out.
- Identify assumptions to explore.
- Go meta: talk about the conversation so far.

Tips for Participating in the Conversation

- Ask someone to elaborate on an idea.
- Offer an open-ended question that begins with "how" or "why."
- Contribute an example of the topic at hand.
- Note a theme emerging across several comments.
- Lift up a tension or contradiction for further exploration.
- Say, "Yes. And..." to expand on a line of thought.
- Thank someone for a contribution.

Tips for Engaging Conflict

- Take a pause before speaking.
- Describe what you hear before challenging it.
- Express empathy for feelings.
- Acknowledge points of agreement.
- Define yourself without dismissing the other.

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