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Facilitating Dialogue in the Classroom

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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 worldview 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.

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.
- Ask, “Yes. And…” to expand on a line of thought.
- 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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