

A Dialogue Primer

From lessons with Plato's Socrates to banter with Phil Donahue, the range of communication we might call "dialogue" at first appears endless. For our purposes, though, the term dialogue describes a special kind of conversation. Dialogue is talk designed to cultivate shared understanding.

David Bohm spearheaded the contemporary practice of dialogue by organizing dialogue groups. The groups often consisted of twenty or so people from various walks of life who agreed to meet once or twice a week, sit in a circle, and 'just talk.' They talked without following an agenda or drawing conclusions. Bohm insisted only that participants resist judging each other in the name of their own "truth." Bohm argues that these dialogues produced a sort of common consciousness characterized by openness that might eventually spread and transform our culture (90-95).

Bohm's admittedly romantic vision finds a number of contemporary parallels. A corporate executive may proclaim the value of the company retreat as a chance for employees to sit on the floor in a circle, pass a "talking stick," and resolve disputes. A new community organization may hold a dialogue session to write a mission statement. Buddhists and Christians or Muslims and Jews may engage in inter-faith dialogue to promote shared understanding.

The gurus of dialogue following Bohm have each produced their own versions of the key principles for an ideal dialogue. Despite preferences for different turns of phrase, the lists bear a remarkable resemblance to each other. From Isaac's work in business management at MIT to the Global Dialogue Institute's guidelines for ecumenical religious conversation (Swidler), several common values emerge. Rather than privilege one version, I offer my own synopsis of those principles that capture common assumptions about the practice of dialogue.

(1.) *Dialogue requires suspending judgment.* Dialogue requires a degree of relativism as the price of admission. As we share our positions, we must at least in principle remain open to changing our minds. We resist concluding from our assumptions that other's ideas are right or wrong. Though we need not check our convictions at the door, we resist passing final judgment.

(2.) *Dialogue requires investigating our assumptions about the truth.* In dialogue, we may speak the truth as we see it, but we must claim that truth as our own. We lift up our convictions for examination. We explore the assumptions that underlie our convictions to discover how and why we hold them so dearly.

(3.) *In dialogue, participants meet each other as equals.* Dialogue entails rejecting the influences of authority and status. In principle if not literally, we sit at a round table. All are welcome and all may speak and be heard. If participants represent two or more sides of a conflict, the positions should be equally represented.

(4.) *The purpose of dialogue is understanding, not persuasion.* In line with the first three principles, we aim to appreciate each other's positions rather than achieve the victory of conversion. Moreover, dialogue does not aim to make decisions or produce solutions. While we may explore common ground or even stumble upon a new way forward, persuading each other to meet in the middle and accept a compromise is not the goal.

In short, the principles of dialogue — at least ideally — create a "safe space" for more genuine conversation than we generally encounter. In fact, the metaphor of a protected "space" cuts across discussions of dialogue. We create a safe space by bracketing the exercise of power in unqualified truth claims, judgment, persuasion, status, decision making, and all the trappings of politics as usual. Of course, dialogue often if not inevitably falls short of its ideal as it occurs in all too human institutions.

Dialogue and Debate

Dialogue	Debate
Is Collaborative Inquiry	Is Oppositional Argument
Creates Shared Understanding	Declares a Winner and a Loser
Listens to Understand	Argues to Persuade
Enlarges my point of view	Solidifies my point of view
Examines Assumptions	Defends the Truth
Questions my Beliefs	Critiques your Beliefs
Opens New Possibilities	Isolates One Solution
Requires Openness to Change	Requires a Closed-Minded Attitude
Builds Trust	Fosters Competition
Suspends Judgment	Demands Judgment
Finds Strengths in Other's Ideas	Isolates Weaknesses in Other's Ideas
Searches for Basic Agreement	Searches for Basic Differences
Values the Whole Person	Privileges Arguments Over Feelings
Assumes Many Answers	Assumes One Right Answer
Remains Open-Ended	Implies a Conclusion

- Adapted from a paper prepared by Shelley Berman, which was based on discussions of the Dialogue Group of the Boston Chapter of Educators for Social Responsibility (ESR). Published in Focus on Study Circles, Winter 1993.
http://thebigconversation.org/dialogue_debate.asp

Ground Rules for Dialogue

Dialogue emphasizes listening, honesty and open-mindedness. In order to keep a dialogue from becoming an adversarial debate or non-personal discussion, ground rules must be established and agreed upon by the group. Generally, a list of ground rules are given to the group, with the understanding that they may omit or add any rules as they see fit. Dialogue groups tend to keep basic ground rules such as those suggested below, and many groups add several of their own. It is important to review the ground rules at the beginning of each dialogue, and for the facilitator to intervene when ground rules are broken to the detriment of the group. Some common ground rules (from Public Conversations Project and the Study Circles Resource Center) are:

- Use 'I' statements instead of 'we,' 'you' or 'they' statements. Express concerns in a manner that invites others to hear, not in a manner that invites defensiveness.
- Listen actively. Try not to let your mind wander or think about what you're going to say while others are speaking. Avoid interrupting.
- Share air time. Try not to dominate the conversation.
- Use considerate language. Avoid using labels whenever possible.
- Feel free to pass if you are not ready or willing to speak. Try not to pressure others to speak.
- Confront misperceptions and mistaken ideas without accusing others of being racist, white supremacist, etc. Instead, ask open-ended questions that gather more information without judging (i.e. What is it that caused you to feel that way?).
- When there is a disagreement, keep talking. Explore the disagreement and search for areas of agreement (common ground).
- Feel free to express your feelings when you have been offended or hurt.
- Inquire rather than assume you know. Ask clarifying questions when you are inclined to make assumptions; ask genuine questions when you are inclined to persuade or argue.
- Be open to changing your mind. This will help you really listen to others' views.
- Don't waste time arguing about points of fact.
- Respect confidentiality. If you talk about your dialogue experience to people outside of the group, refrain from using people's names or sharing their personal experiences.
- Make a good effort to attend all of the dialogue sessions.

The Characteristics of Dialogue

These are the major components virtually all scholars writing on dialogue, under whatever label, identify as essential for dialogic communication.

(1) Genuineness. One is direct, honest, and straightforward. One imparts himself as he really is and avoids facade, stratagem, or projecting an image. The communication filters formed by roles, conventions, and artifice must be overcome. Openness to all relevant information and feeling is encouraged.

(2) Accurate Empathic Understanding. Things are seen from the other's viewpoint. One feels an event from the side of the other as well as from one's own side. Feelings should be accurately reflected and clarified.

(3) Unconditional Positive Regard. One expresses non-possessive warmth for the other. The other is valued for his worth and integrity as a human. A partner in dialogue is affirmed, not merely tolerated, even though one opposes him. The other is confirmed in his right to his individuality. And confirmation, or unconditional positive regard, implies a desire to assist the other to maximize his potential, to help him become what he can become. The spirit of mutual trust is promoted. One affirms the other as a unique individual without necessarily approving of his behavior.

(4) Presentness. Participants in a dialogue must give full concentration to bringing their total and authentic beings to the encounter. They must demonstrate willingness to become fully involved with each other by taking time, avoiding distraction, being communicatively accessible, and risking attachment. One avoids being an on-looker who simply takes in what is presented to him or an observer who analyzes. Rather what is said to one enters meaningfully into his life; one sets aside the armor used to thwart the signs of personal address. The dialogic person listens receptively and attentively and responds readily and totally. One is willing to reveal himself to others and to receive their revelation.

(5) Spirit of Mutual Equality. Although society may rank participants in dialogue as of unequal status or accomplishment, the participants themselves view each other as persons, not as objects to be manipulated or exploited. The exercise of power or superiority is avoided. Participants do not impose their opinion, cause, or will. In dialogic communication, agreement of the listener with the speaker's aim is secondary to independent, self-deciding participation. Participants aid each other in making responsible decisions regardless whether the decision be favorable or unfavorable to the particular view presented.

(6) Supportive Psychological Climate. One encourages the other to communicate. One allows free expression, seeks understanding, and avoids value judgments that stifle. One shows desire and capacity to listen without anticipating, interfering, competing, refuting, or warping meanings into preconceived interpretations. Assumptions and prejudgments are minimized.