

Thoughts on Dialogue

The purpose of Deliberative Dialogue is for decision-makers and citizens to gain a greater understanding about important social issues.

“Deliberative dialogue is a form of discussion aimed at finding the best course of action. Deliberative questions take the form “What should we do?” The purpose is not so much to solve a problem or resolve an issue as to explore the most promising avenues for action. Following a usage that traces back to the ancient Greeks, deliberation can be defined as the process of establishing intent and resolve, where a person or group explores different solutions before settling on a specific course of action. “We deliberate not about ends,” said Aristotle, “but about the means to attain ends.” Deliberation is necessary for what is uncertain, he noted, when there may be reasons for deciding on one course of action but equally compelling reasons for deciding on another.

Deliberative dialogue differs from other forms of public discourse — such as debate, negotiation, brainstorming, consensus-building — because the objective is not so much to talk together as to think together, not so much to reach a conclusion as to discover where a conclusion might lie. Thinking together involves listening deeply to other points of view, exploring new ideas and perspectives, searching for points of agreement, and bringing unexamined assumptions into the open. The process usually revolves around a pressing question that needs to be addressed, rather than a problem that can be efficiently solved. A problem needs to be solved; a question cannot be solved, but it can be experienced and, out of that experience, a common understanding can emerge that opens an acceptable path to action.

The Greeks may not have invented dialogue, but they introduced the idea that individuals could not be intelligent on their own, that it was only by reasoning with others that they could uncover the truth for themselves. The Greeks understood that if two or more people were unsure about a question, they could accomplish something together they could not do on their own. By questioning and probing each other, carefully dissecting and analyzing ideas, finding the inconsistencies, never attacking or insulting but always searching for what they could accept between them, they could gradually attain deeper understanding and insight.

In this spirit, deliberative dialogue among a group of people is aimed at establishing a framework for mutual understanding and a common purpose that transcends mere ideas and opinions. While it may not produce consensus, it can produce collective insight and judgment reflecting the thinking of the group as a whole — personal disagreements notwithstanding. It is commonly assumed that the only alternatives to consensus are compromise and dissent. But deliberative dialogue offers another possibility by assuming that individuals' views may be to some degree amorphous and indeterminate until they have been, as Madison put it, “refined and enlarged” through the process of reasoning with others.

...As people voiced their ideas, their experience, and their opinions, as they took in the perspectives of others and clarified points of tension and disagreement, the emphasis would gradually shift away from ideological differences toward common values.”

<http://www.scottlondon.com/reports/dialogue.html>

Tips for Effective Dialogue: Dialogue vs. Discussion

Interactive communication or dialogue refers to interacting in ways that build shared meaning, rather than colliding in ways that foster disagreement, frustration and confusion.

Dialogue is a subtle process that may be difficult to understand, and even more difficult to actually create.

Benefits of Dialogue:

Dialogue has the ability to convert detractors into supporters, conflict into consensus, and add depth to relationships.

A dialogue influences another's perspective by first demonstrating a deep understanding of the position you want to influence. People frequently resist attempts to be influenced by using the statement, "You just don't understand."

In a dialogue, your skills of collaborative inquiry and listening provide others with a profound sense of being heard. When we feel that we are heard, we become more willing to be open to another point of view.

If dialogue is so effective, why aren't more people using it?

The profound efficacy of dialogue requires much of us:

- Listening more deeply and for longer periods of time.
- Inquiring of others and paraphrasing their ideas when every cell in your body wants to attack, defend or explain.
- Becoming aware of your mind drifting and repeatedly returning it to the topic at hand.
- Examining our thoughts and separating assumptions from facts.

Dialogue requires:

1. A complete shift in mindset from telling others what you think, to inquiring of them what they think.
2. A deeper level of listening and a more active approach to demonstrating that you are listening to others.
3. An ability to penetrate into another's assumptions and mental maps to uncover the framework that governs their behavior.

What Does Dialogue Look Like?

Recognize it when:

- The issue develops keen intellectual interest.
- The conversation is suffused with laughter.
- Everyone is involved, and people are listening deeply.
- The conversation becomes animated.
- You become eager to add to what someone else has said; but you are listening more than talking.
- You sense an almost palpable excitement.
- The multiple perspectives create a sense of aliveness and possibility.
- Different viewpoints interest you instead of annoy you.

Dialogue — A Jazz Improvisation Metaphor

A jazz improvisation is a good metaphor for dialogue. Each musician must build on what the others are already doing. The jazz musician can't just begin playing his favorite riff. He must listen to what others are playing, and then build on it. The result is something unique — no one person controls the musical direction. They improvise and initiate, but always in relationship to what others are doing.

Discussion vs. Dialogue

Discussion has the same roots as "concussion" and "percussion." The Latin origin of discuss is "[discutere](#)" - to dash or shake apart. Hence, to discuss is to shake apart what others say.

In a discussion we break things down, fragment the whole, analyze the pieces, and seek to convince others of our insights. You recognize discussion by its competitive nature. If you are only listening in order to prepare your own counter-arguments, you are involved in a discussion.

Often the default in conversations, is discussion. Each side will lob its viewpoint across the table. The other will then repeat its counter-position. You have a sense of positions being smacked back and forth like a puck in a hockey game.

If your trust of the others involved diminishes along with your patience and good will, you are likely in discussion.

<http://www.hendersongroup.com/articles/tips-for-effective-dialogue-dialogue-vs-discussion.asp>

Dialogue, Debate, and Discussion

What are the differences between and among
dialogue, debate, and discussion?

Dialogue	Debate and/or Discussion
Dialogue is collaborative; cooperative; multiple sides work toward a shared understanding	Debate is competitive and/or oppositional; two (or more) opposing sides try to prove each other wrong; sometimes discussion can move in this direction as well
In dialogue, one listens to understand, to make meaning, and to find common ground	In debate, (and sometimes discussion) one listens to find flaws, to spot differences, and to counter arguments
Dialogue enlarges and possibly changes a participant's point of view	Debate defends assumptions as truth; in discussions, participants may tend to "dig in"
Dialogue creates an open-minded attitude; an openness to being wrong and an openness to change	Debate creates a close-minded attitude, a determination to be right; discussion often tends to lead toward one "right" answer
In dialogue, one submits one's best thinking, expecting that other people's reflections will help improve it rather than threaten it	In debate, and often discussion, one submits one's best thinking and defends it against challenge to show that it is right
Dialogue calls for temporarily suspending of one's beliefs	Debate, and sometimes discussion, calls for investing wholeheartedly in one's beliefs
In dialogue, one searches for strengths in all positions	In debate, and sometimes discussion, one searches for weaknesses in the other positions
Dialogue respects all the other participants and seeks not to alienate or offend	Debate rebuts contrary positions and <i>may</i> belittle or deprecate other participants; a discussion gone awry may end up this way as well
Dialogue assumes that many people have pieces of answers and that cooperation can lead to a greater understanding	Debate assumes a single right answer that somebody already has
Dialogue remains open-ended	Debate demands a conclusion
Dialogue is mutual inquiry; collective knowledge	Discussion is individual opinions; individual knowledge
Dialogue practices a product	Debate and discussion produce products
Dialogue is divergent	Debate, and often discussion, is convergent

Note:

The differences between and among dialogue, discussion, and debate should not imply that dialogue is "good" and that discussion and debate are "bad." There are certainly times when discussion and debate are useful instructional strategies. The chart above is simply intended to articulate the differences.

Related Resources

<http://www.greece.k12.ny.us/academics.cfm?subpage=1557>

http://oregonstate.edu/oei/sites/default/files/comparing_debate_discussions_dialogue.pdf

<http://www.soapboxorations.com/ddigest/senge.htm>

<http://ncdd.org/>

http://www.ncl.org/publications/ncr/91-2/ncr91-2_article.pdf

http://www.geneseo.edu/tlc/deliberative_dialogue

<http://www.sedl.org/policy/insights/n09/1.html>