


Dialogue

 Practicing intentional conversation strategies to improve mutual understanding or collaborative decision-making

Dialogue Defined

The principle of *dialogue* in organizing, engagement, and equity work refers to *intentional forms of conversation* that are used to improve mutual understanding, appreciation, and respect among individuals and groups, often for the purpose of facilitating a collaboration or decision-making process. While dialogue techniques may be used in informal social interactions, the term is most commonly applied to small-group or large-group conversations that are purposefully designed and facilitated to achieve specific goals, such as helping people work together to solve a problem, develop a plan, execute a project, or resolve a conflict.

In practice, dialogue can take a wide variety of forms in schools and communities. For example, dialogue may be used to solicit feedback on a proposed school policy, involve the public in district decisions, initiate a strategic-planning process, reflect on the progress or shortcomings of an initiative, improve workplace relationships, establish a collaborative partnership between two or more organizations, respond to a pressing crisis, or reduce cross-cultural tensions and misunderstanding in a community.

A dialogue may occur over multiple hours on a single day, or it may unfold as a series of conversations that take place over several weeks or months—although the duration of a dialogue should be sufficient enough to allow participants to engage in sustained, in-depth discussions of the given topic. While many forms of dialogue occur in-person and through “face-to-face” interactions, telecommunication technologies have created opportunities for online platforms and mobile applications to mediate dialogue among individuals and groups who may be located anywhere in the world.

Discussion: Dialogue vs. Deliberation

It is important to note that there is no universally accepted definition of dialogue, and the term may be used in more or less precise ways in different contexts. That said, scholars and practitioners have developed a variety of specific technical definitions of the concept and practice, and they typically distinguish dialogue from other forms of conversation. For example, dialogue is often contrasted with *discussion* (informal and unstructured social conversations that are not intended to achieve specific outcomes) or *debate* (argumentation in which two or more opposing sides on an issue make a case for their position).

In fact, dialogue is often used as an antidote to social, cultural, and civic problems that arise when casual discussion or debate are the only forms of conversation taking place in an organization or community. For example, dialogue can help to address difficult problems—such as racial stereotyping or political polarization—that tend to occur when people either avoid discussing these uncomfortable topics or only discuss them to argue for a particular viewpoint. Dialogue has also been a central feature in conflict-resolution movements across the globe, including the “truth and reconciliation commissions” conducted in post-apartheid South Africa and other countries recovering from civil war or violent conflict.

While the terms *dialogue* and *deliberation* are often used interchangeably, the **National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation**, along with many scholars and practitioners, **makes a useful distinction** between the two concepts. The organization defines *dialogue* as “a process that allows people, usually in small groups, to share their perspectives and experiences with one another about difficult issues we tend to just debate about or avoid entirely,” while *deliberation* “emphasizes the importance of examining options and trade-offs to make better decisions,” particularly “decisions about important public issues like health care and immigration [that] are too often made through the use of power or coercion rather than a sound decision-making process that involves all parties and explores all options.”

Although dialogue strategies can—and often are—used in a group decision-making process, dialogues do not necessarily have to result in a specific outcome or action—they can simply be a collective act of sharing and listening. Deliberation, on the other hand, is generally used to make decisions. In a “deliberative dialogue” process, participants may consider competing ideas and options, discuss the pros and cons of different approaches, and work toward a decision, proposal, plan, or outcome that everyone has contributed to, understands, accepts, and supports.

While dialogue is a nuanced concept that can take many different forms in practice, the following descriptions illustrate a few common characteristics of dialogue:

- **Storytelling:** In a dialogue, participants are often encouraged to talk about their personal experiences and histories. When participants share personal stories, it helps other participants develop a stronger understanding and appreciation of how those experiences shaped their values, priorities, or perspectives, particularly when participants come from different racial, cultural, or socioeconomic backgrounds.
- **Discovery:** Dialogues allow participants to explore and discover new insights, ideas, or perspectives. Rather than predetermining outcomes, a dialogue process typically starts with unanswered questions, unresolved problems, or decisions that need to be made. While a dialogue is typically designed to achieve specific objectives—such as the development of a plan or the resolution of a conflict, for example—a dialogue only provides the structure for participants to discuss, deliberate, decide, or collaborate. Participants typically determine the outcomes of a dialogue, not the organizers and facilitators.
- **Inquiry:** Dialogues help participants consider different viewpoints, weigh competing options, examine unfamiliar information, understand complex issues, and reflect on their

own beliefs, opinions, values, or biases. In a dialogue, participants develop new insights, perspectives, and knowledge that they did not have at the outset of the process, which can generate better ideas, proposals, or solutions, including surprising or counterintuitive ideas that were not being considered before the dialogue occurred.

- **Civility:** In a dialogue, participants are generally required to speak and act in ways that are respectful to other participants, and to listen and ask questions rather than argue a particular point of view. Respectful discussions and interactions can help participants dispel the misperceptions, assumptions, stereotypes, or labeling that often make it difficult for diverse groups of people to converse or collaborate productively. Dialogues allow participants to disagree in respectful and constructive ways, which helps diverse groups avoid the contentiousness, conflicts, and biased outcomes that often result from argumentation and debate. However, civility does not mean that free speech is suppressed or that certain viewpoints are silenced—participants are encouraged to express their honest opinions, but to do so in ways that are not disrespectful, intimidating, hostile, or shaming to other participants or groups. Facilitators generally help dialogue groups to maintain civil conversations using shared agreements, polite reminders, and other strategies. For example, facilitators may ask participants to speak only for themselves and not for others.
- **Empathy:** Dialogues provide opportunities for participants to hear viewpoints that are different from their own, ask questions, and reflect on their own experiences, values, or opinions from a new perspective. The act of listening, questioning, and reflecting can help build greater compassion, appreciation, and mutual respect among participants, particularly between individuals and groups who have different beliefs or come from different cultural backgrounds, which can then increase trust and strengthen relationships.
- **Non-Consensus:** In a deliberative dialogue process, group consensus may not be achieved. In fact, universal consensus is rarely attained at the end of a deliberative process—and it shouldn't be the desired goal. Because group decisions typically require some form of compromise or trade-off, it is more important that participants understand why a decision was made, that they feel their viewpoints were heard and considered, that they perceive the process to have been fair and unbiased, and that they accept and support the outcome even if they still disagree or feel disappointment.

To learn more about how principles can be applied in education organizing, engagement, and equity work, see [HOW PRINCIPLES WORK](#) →

Dialogue Strategies

This section describes a selection of representative dialogue strategies that may be used in education organizing, engagement, and equity work:

1. **Providing an intentional structure**
 2. **Sharing essential information and context**
 3. **Establishing rules and group agreements**
 4. **Designing for inclusivity and safety**
 5. **Ensuring equity of voice, participation, and power**
 6. **Providing skilled facilitation**
 7. **Listening intentionally to understand**
 8. **Using open-ended questions**
 9. **Co-creating agendas and solutions**
 10. **Reflecting on the process and outcomes**
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1. Providing an intentional structure

Dialogues are generally a planned and organized process that is designed and facilitated in intentional ways to achieve specific goals.

- The structure of a dialogue is usually based on insights from social psychology, adult learning, conflict resolution, civic participation, and other fields that have suggested methods for helping people avoid unproductive forms of interaction so they can converse or collaborate in more civil and constructive ways.
- The planned elements of a dialogue—its agenda, process, rules, activities, questions, and facilitation—are essential to its success. Because many forms of social conversation or public discourse can be disrespectful, negative, or contentious, dialogues are structured to help participants avoid conversational habits and social conventions that may be problematic or unproductive.
- In some cases, community members may never have participated in a highly structured and facilitated conversation before, and the unfamiliar format and conventions of a dialogue process might initially feel unnatural, uncomfortable, or forced. In these cases, facilitators will usually remind participants that the structure, even if it seems awkward, is intentional, and each element of the process is purposeful.

2. Sharing essential information and context

In a dialogue, participants are often given explanations, data, or other forms of information to contextualize an issue or problem, or to explain the rationale behind the process.

- By providing essential information, dialogue organizers help participants base their

deliberations on statistics, evidence, and facts, rather than on assumptions, hearsay, misinformation, and other potentially inaccurate or misleading sources of information.

- In some cases, a steering committee, composed of a representative cross-section of community members, will identify and select the information provided to participants to ensure that it is objective, factual, or represents a balance of different perspectives.
- The personal stories and explanations shared in a dialogue generally give participants the information they need to develop a more nuanced and informed understanding of their community, different cultural groups, or another participant's perspective.

3. Establishing rules and group agreements

Dialogue organizers nearly always establish a set of guidelines, agreements, rules, or “norms” at the outset of the conversation that participants agree to follow.

- Ground rules articulate the kinds of behaviors that will not be allowed, such as disrespectful or derogatory comments, and the kinds of behaviors that are expected and encouraged, such as respectful listening and questioning.
- Depending on the format or goals of a dialogue, ground rules may be provided or recommended by organizers, or they are developed in collaboration with participants. When organizers “co-develop” ground rules with participants, the process serves to model how a diverse group of people can engage in a productive discussion that results in a decision everyone can understand, accept, and support. Yet because co-developing group agreements takes time, facilitators often provide a set of recommended ground rules when available time is short.

4. Designing for inclusivity and safety

Dialogues create a forum in which each participant is welcome and encouraged to participate, and in which diverse viewpoints can be shared without fear of social intimidation or repercussions. In many cases, dialogues are open to the public and any community member is welcome to attend, particularly when the topics being discussed affect a community or public institutions such as schools.

- Dialogue organizers will often break up participants into smaller groups so that each person has an opportunity to speak up and be heard in the time available, and ground rules may establish the expectation that participants are expected to refrain from talking too much so that others have the opportunity to speak.
- Organizers generally attempt to invite and recruit participants who are culturally and demographically representative of the larger community or school population to ensure that the viewpoints, priorities, and concerns of different groups are included and heard.

5. Ensuring equity of voice, participation, and power

Many forms for public discussion are “one-way” conversations in which public officials, school administrators, experts, and others in positions of power, authority, or influence dictate the terms, topics, and outcomes of the conversation. Unlike these forms of public discussion—such as a school-board meeting in which public officials may do most of the talking and a small number of residents are given only a few minutes to speak—dialogues are generally structured to encourage equal or equitable participation.

- A variety of strategies will be used to ensure that all participants are treated as fairly as possible. For example, ground rules will be applied equally to everyone, public officials and administrators will participate like any other community member, translators will be on hand for those who cannot speak English, complimentary bus passes or ride-sharing will be provided to those who don’t have a vehicle, or facilitators will ask outspoken participants to talk less so that others who may be less accustomed to speaking in public or in large groups have an opportunity to contribute and be heard.
- Dialogue is based on a few fundamental premises: the belief that (1) participant has important information, perspectives, and insights to share, and that the viewpoints of authority figures, professionals, or experts are not necessarily more accurate or valuable than those of students, families, and community members; (2) decisions, proposals, solutions, or actions that result from dialogues and deliberative processes will be more creative, more effective, and more representative of the diverse values and perspectives in a given organization or community; and (3) group power dynamics need to be equalized to ensure that all participants have an opportunity to be heard in a safe and non-threatening environment, that all contributions are equally and fairly considered, and that group decisions are as unbiased or unprejudiced as possible.

6. Providing skilled facilitation

Skilled facilitation is essential to the success of a dialogue process. Facilitators provide the conversational structure, establish ground rules, promote equitable participation, and ensure that the process and discussions remain on topic and productive. Dialogue facilitators make sure that participants follow the ground rules, behave respectfully toward one another, and feel safe and welcomed.

- When necessary, facilitators may intervene with prompting questions to keep the conversation going, redirect discussions when they get off-topic, invite quiet participants to contribute their thoughts, and remind outspoken participants when they may be talking too much.
- While some dialogues are organized and run by professional facilitators, dialogues may also

be facilitated by community members who have trained in basic facilitation techniques. In these cases, the trained local facilitators often become assets to a school or community whenever facilitation skills are needed, such as when conflicts or crises arise.

→ For a related discussion, see the [Facilitation Principle of organizing, engagement, and equity](#)

7. Listening intentionally to understand

While all conversations require some form of listening, people are generally asked to listen in very specific ways when they participate in a dialogue process.

- For example, dialogue facilitators may ask participants to listen respectfully and attentively, refrain from interruption or rudeness, ask questions when a statement is unclear or confusing, and express appreciation when another participant makes an insightful comment or shares an emotionally difficult personal experience.
- Facilitators may also establish group agreements such as “listen to understand, not to respond.” In this case, facilitators may use the ground rule to point out that people often give more attention to thinking up responses and counter-arguments in a casual conversation than they do to making a sincere attempt to understand someone else’s viewpoint.

8. Using open-ended questions

On many public issues, community members may base their viewpoints on partial information, preexisting beliefs, unconscious bias, political affiliations, and other factors that may obscure important considerations. In a dialogue, participants are invited to explore and ask questions.

- In many cases, dialogues will be framed around a question that is central to a community problem or opportunity: How can we address bias and discrimination in our school? How can we strengthen relationships between teachers and parents? How do we want to work together in this partnership? By posing and discussing open-ended questions—rather than arguing about competing proposals, for example—participants in a dialogue typically develop a more informed understanding of the nuances and complexity of a given issue, problem, or opportunity.

9. Co-creating agendas and solutions

Dialogues create opportunities for participants to collaboratively explore options, generate ideas, propose solutions, and—importantly—own the outcomes and decisions that result from the process. When stakeholders are left out of important school or community decisions that affect them and their families, they are more likely to question the decisions, be skeptical of motives, or resent being left out of the process.

- A dialogue presents opportunities for community-involved problem solving and decision making, which can not only produce better ideas, proposals, and results, but it can also build support and enthusiasm for the outcome, as well as greater trust and confidence in school and community leaders.

10. Reflecting on the process and outcomes

In a dialogue, participants typically engage in multiple forms of facilitated reflection: they reflect on the question, issue, problem, or opportunity under discussion; they reflect on their own ideas, perspectives, opinions, and experiences, as well as those of others; and they reflect on the conversation, process, and results.

- Because opportunities for focused and sustained reflection are uncommon in everyday life, dialogues can help participants develop new insights and understandings they might not have acquired otherwise, or they may cause participants to reconsider previously held positions, assumptions, or beliefs. During reflective debriefing at the conclusion of the dialogue or a small-group discussion, participants also provide useful feedback to organizers and facilitators that will help them improve the dialogue process going forward.

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