

Why is dialogue valuable?

These are challenging times. Rapid and pervasive change dominates our lives. There is an urgent need to reconstruct our leading institutions so as to build a more humane and manageable future. Teaching and learning are two areas where major transitions are needed. Educational success in the new millennium requires more than mastery of academic disciplines. It is not enough for students to know science, history, literature or maths. They must acquire the skills and understandings needed to make democratic deliberation work, not only in the classroom, but in the community at large. Educational practice must be steeped in dialogue to renew learning and teaching and to fulfil the promise of democratic living.

Educational and community leaders are beginning to understand that in order to increase student achievement, communities and their schools must work together differently. Communities are embracing program after program to meet the growing educational, social and health needs of youth and the larger public before, during and after school hours. From full-service schools to after school and early childhood programs, school leaders recognise that meeting the needs of young people requires a much higher level of community and school participation than most models of schooling can accommodate.

New educational initiatives depend upon the ability of everyone involved, especially students, to work together. Building community, identifying concerns and resources, coordinating participation, and planning action together must become habitual practices so that school communities can direct change, not be overwhelmed by it. Success in these community-wide efforts demands frequent public engagement and regular community involvement. Such involvement relies on building trusting, informed, face to face relationships among all those who have a stake in education.

We believe that dialogue will fuel these relationships. Under the right conditions, conversation can (1) generate new knowledge, (2) enhance shared understanding, (3) renew hope, and (4) stimulate collective action. Good dialogue encourages people to solve their problems collaboratively, to see one another as valuable sources of knowledge and experience, and to forge new links with each other. In our view, there is no surer route to community building and to fulfilling the promise of democracy and lifelong learning than through the deepening of good, ongoing dialogue. Such dialogue can increase student achievement, transform teaching and learning and renew relationships that connect communities to their schools. Dialogue, as David Bohm (1996) has pointed out, is a process involving at least two people in which a "stream of meaning" flows among and through the participants. It is a non-competitive process in which "everyone wins". Out of this unobstructed stream of meaning emerges a shared understanding that is new and creative and which has the power to hold people together.

Skills for Democracy School Dialogue Project

With the support of the New Mexico Dispute Resolution Centre, we invited some middle and high school teachers to join us in two days of deliberation and activity about principles and practices of conducting good dialogues. The facilitators of these workshops introduced many useful ideas to the participants, but the participants themselves were also energetic contributors and actively shared many of their experiences of leading young people in dialogue. In thinking about the issues and concerns that are most important in making discussion of controversial issues work, we have concluded that there are six key questions about which all participants should be aware. They are:

1. Why is dialogue valuable? (A question we have attempted to answer in this section.)
2. What are some of the conditions for good dialogue?
3. What are some good ways to get dialogue started?
4. What are some good ways to keep dialogue going?
5. How can we deepen dialogue?
6. How can we connect dialogue to action?

What are some of the conditions for good dialogue?

One set of conditions has to do with the attitudes or dispositions that participants should practise to create good dialogue. When we lead discussions, we try to get participants to be aware of these dispositions. We also model them and encourage participants to adopt these dispositions themselves. We can never expect more than partial success in acting on these dispositions, but even naming them and being aware of them helps participants to move toward more collaborative and respectful interactions. We have found the following to be especially relevant and useful:

1. Hospitality
2. Participation
3. Mindfulness
4. Humility
5. Mutuality
6. Deliberation
7. Appreciation
8. Hope
9. Autonomy

Temperature Reading

Time: Anywhere from 10 minutes to a full class session

Materials: None, except a list of the categories

Objective: To get people talking authentically about their experience in a group setting

Procedures:

1. Tell students that you want to take a temperature reading, not of the outside, but of the inside of each person in the class. Share the purpose in writing or verbally.

The purpose of a temperature check is to give every participant time and opportunity to say what is on his or her mind or in his or her heart.

2. Mention that there are five categories to consider speaking to, yet students should, over time, feel free to say what needs to be said.

The categories are: *Appreciations*, *New Information*, *Puzzlements*, *Concerns with Recommendations*, and *Hopes*.

Appreciations is the category to use when expressing how much you learnt from Jane's presentation or how grateful you are to Keith for sharing his personal experience or how much you enjoyed last evening's dinner. The *New Information* category permits announcements, the sharing of the day's agenda or changes in scheduling, the time for the next exam or the due date for an upcoming essay. *Puzzlements* are questions you have for which you don't necessarily expect an answer. These might include a comment from yesterday that you didn't quite understand, lack of clarity about the purposes of an assignment, or general perplexity about the meaning of life. The *Concerns with Recommendations* category permits people to raise a concern or voice an objection to something. In order to keep things constructive, any concern that is voiced must be accompanied by a suggestion as to how to remedy the problem, though no one is obligated to adopt the suggestion. The person raising the concern must have given some thought not only to the problem but also to how it can be addressed. Finally, there is the *Hopes* category. Relevant to this category are: hopes or expectations for the day, hopes or aspirations for the semester, things that you hope won't happen.

Good Ways to Get Dialogue Started

How the discussion begins can sometimes set the tone for how productively participants interact and exchange ideas with one another throughout the rest of the conversation. There are many ways to initiate discussion but perhaps the most important thing is to stimulate thought and to trigger a reaction without imposing a particular point of view or limiting opportunities for individual expression. Choosing the right question or the right activity has to do with opening up the range of possible directions or responses, not closing them down.

Before doing anything, though, it is a good idea to establish a space for dialogue by forming the chairs into a circle, actively welcoming participants, and celebrating the opportunity that this gathering signifies. Participants need to know from the beginning that their involvement is important. The circle underscores the fact that every individual should be visible to all others and that each person's contribution is invited. By celebrating the occasion of dialogue, participants get the sense from the beginning that this assemblage of people is significant and that wonderful, unexpected things can happen when they start talking to each other.

It is also useful, before the discussion begins, to help participants understand that real dialogue is a collaborative, non-competitive activity in which people seek both increased understanding and common ground. Dialogue embraces complexity and flexibility and strives to find room for many points of view. Dialogue should be contrasted with debate. Debate tends to be contentious and puts a high premium on prevailing over one's opponent. Below is a comparison of dialogue and debate that may be useful to share with people as they begin the hard work of collaborating together in discussion.

Comparison of Dialogue and Debate

Adapted from 'Comparison of Dialogue and Debate' by Sheldon Barnes and the Boston Area Educators for Social Responsibility Dialogue Group, 1983

Dialogue is talking with others.

Dialogue is collaborative: two or more sides working together toward common understanding.

In dialogue, one listens to the other side(s) in order to understand, find meaning and reach agreement.

Debate is talking at others.

Debate is oppositional: two sides oppose each other and attempt to prove each other wrong.

In debate, one listens to the other side in order to find flaws and disagreement.

Dialogue enlarges and possibly changes a participant's point of view.

Dialogue complicates positions and issues.

Dialogue is flexible in nature.

Dialogue stresses the skill of synthesis.

Dialogue strives for multiplicity in perspective.

Dialogue calls for temporarily suspending one's beliefs.

In dialogue, everyone is part of the problem.

Dialogue affirms the idea of people learning from each other.

Dialogue remains open-minded.

Debate affirms a participant's own point of view.

Debate simplifies positions and issues.

Debate is rigid in nature.

Debate stresses the skill of analysis.

Debate strives for singularity in perspective.

Debate calls for investing wholeheartedly in one's beliefs.

In debate, one person, solution or viewpoint wins over the other.

Debate affirms the idea of people individually in competition with each other.

Debate insists on a final answer.

Once people have a clear understanding of what it means to engage in an authentic dialogue, a simple way to get things started - that allows everyone to put forward a view - is to ask what issue or problem has been bothering them lately. Participants are invited to talk briefly about this issue, but they are also encouraged to listen for patterns or recurring themes that may emerge as the discussion proceeds. These themes or patterns can then be used as a basis for future discussions which will have relevance and value for all of the discussants. Along the same lines, discussion can begin by having participants generate questions for which they do not have answers and by which they are genuinely puzzled. These questions can then form the foundation for subsequent exchanges. Sentence completion exercises are another way to get things going. Participants are invited to complete sentences like 'The thing that really made me angry when I read the newspaper today was...'. The discussion that ensues when small groups share their completions can be eye-opening and stimulating and generate much more discussion about how the group feels about leading controversial issues.

Activity Number One

Another way to get discussion started, especially when the participants do not know each other, is to distribute a controversial quotation to the group and invite their reaction. A favourite one about the educational system is simply: 'Schools never take the lead on social change; they merely reproduce the inequalities that already exist in the larger society'. If there are teachers in the group, they will feel compelled to disagree strongly. Others, such as parents, will also be inclined to take a strong stand against this claim. However, there should be enough people in the group to argue in favour of the position. Invariably, this quote - and ones like it - get people excited and stimulated, which leads to some energetic and passionate exchanges.

When fairly large groups of people come together, it is sometimes difficult to make people comfortable enough to interact productively. One way around this is a technique called *Snowballing* or *Pyramid*. In this process, a topic of mutual interest to the group is chosen and participants jot down their initial thoughts on the question. Each participant is then asked to join with one other person to discuss their initial reactions to the issue. After perhaps ten minutes of chatting and sharing, each pair joins another pair to form quartets. The groups of four then spend another ten minutes or so sharing their initial answers and building on what was discussed in the pairs. When time is up, each group of four joins another quartet to create octets or groups of eight. The process continues in this way until the whole group is reunited. *Snowballing* combines the intimacy of small group pairings with the breadth and scope of large group discussion, because over time both kinds of groupings are encouraged. It is also a way for people in large groups to get to know one another more gradually than is possible in a single large group.

Sometimes what is needed to get people talking is just to provide a space for each person to speak in turn. This is what the *Circle of Voices* process is all about. With *Circle of Voices*, participants are invited to form their chairs into a circle and to respond to a question or simply to share something about themselves. One person begins and speaks without interruption for no more than two minutes. The person to the first speaker's left then has an opportunity to say something, again limited to two minutes. The opportunity to speak makes its way around the circle. Once everyone has had a chance to speak, general discussion may begin. This process loosens people up, affords them an opportunity to speak without the threat of interruption or challenge, and can reveal a great deal about the people gathered in the circle. It helps participants to get to know one another, but it also allows each person to set the terms and limits on how much is disclosed.