

Introduction to Dialogue

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Dialogue is an overused and much abused term for a very specific means of communication that we rarely employ effectively today. Dialogue is a communications process that helps individuals clarify their personal thinking and values in a community of practice. It may also help communities or teams discover shared meaning, to think coherently, and perhaps to act in concert in ways that serve the common good of the group. Unlike a discussion or debate, in dialogue there is no attempt to have any particular point of view prevail. Rather dialogue results in shared understanding without judgment. It is about building relationships, learning together and exploring personal and community values.

Intent

Early in the creation of a dialogue group, a decision should be made regarding its intent. This is important to avoid creating expectations that will go unmet and subsequent disappointment and criticism of the effort that is sure to follow. Ask the question, is the primary purpose of this work to make a decision or take some action or, is the intent improved individual and collective exploration and understanding of a situation (which may or may not result in a decision or action). This is important. If the primary intent is exploration and learning through inquiry, insight dialogue is in order.

What is dialogue?

While the word “dialogue” is often used today as a substitute for polite discussion or conversation, it is used here to signify a specific discipline with a particular meaning and intent. A dialogue is a group communication process in which participants practice certain techniques to enhance their individual and collective learning. In dialogue there is a shared commitment to inquiry without necessarily reaching a decision or taking a specific action. In fact, the expectation or even a hope that a decision will be achieved by consensus or otherwise is enough to derail the dialogue process.

It may be useful to think about what a dialogue is not. As stated above it is not a decision-making process, although it can result in relationships among group members that make decision-making much easier. It is not a tool for planning action, yet it can produce the kind of mutual respect and understanding that improves the likelihood of successful group action. A single individual does not lead, however a facilitator is needed to help get it started and guide the process.

The root of the word “dialogue” is from the Greek “*dia*” or through and “*logos*” or word or meaning. Therefore the dialogue process is a stream of meaning that flows through and among the participants. On the other hand, the word “discussion” has the same root as percussion and concussion. A useful image of a discussion might be a ping-pong game using words that bounce back and forth. In dialogue, members of the group can explore but go beyond any individual understanding. New insights may be gained that were not possible through thinking in isolation. Participants help each other observe the incoherence in each other’s thought as people learn how to share thoughts, emotions, and feelings while reflecting on their own.

Process

So what happens in dialogue? As stated above, the primary purpose is collective learning or insight. This happens when someone brings up a thought or feeling, another person changes it and then still another connects it with a previous thought or feeling. The thought/feeling flows in a kind of participatory awareness that may result in both individual and collective learning over time. It takes practice. In addition to the group and individual learning, several other outcomes may result from the process. Quite often, the dialogue results in improved relationships among the participants as well as a sense of shared meaning and mutual commitment to

each other. But it is not always easy going. When people are involved in a dialogue about something that is important to them they bring their whole bodies into the conversation, their hearts pump faster, adrenalin races, stomachs knot, shoulders tense. Participants get angry, sad, confused and frustrated. If members of the group can identify and share their thoughts as well as their feelings, get help in this process from fellow members, and stay with it long enough, a group consciousness may emerge. While this feeling of connectedness doesn't last, it can be a time of rapid and marked learning. While dialogue is a powerful communication practice that can transform individuals and groups, it is not easy.

While the purpose of dialogue is collective exploration and learning, it is not necessary to avoid individual advocacy for a particular idea or position, provided the purpose of the advocacy is to further collective learning. Advocacy is generally used for the purpose of convincing a group of the "rightness" of your own position. Even if this happens in a dialogue, the outcome may be group learning if it is noticed - and the group explores the underlying assumptions of the advocacy position.

The process may begin with a group of diverse people coming together for the purpose of joining in dialogue. While intent is a necessary ingredient, it is insufficient in itself. The result of unguided talk may be interesting conversation and perhaps individual learning, but not necessarily dialogue. If the group stays together without the tools of dialogue and continues to explore differences of opinion, people may find themselves feeling frustrated. Eventually the group may dissolve in embarrassment or a sense of futility. Perhaps heated debate will produce smaller groups that cluster around ideas or people with whom they agree, allowing the "us and them" blame game to proceed in comfort, but with little positive outcome. If enough people hang in and begin to search within themselves for the source of their own personal discomfort or anger, a new kind of conversation may begin to happen. By working through the crisis of collective discomfort, a new sense of trust may be forged by the group. This is more likely to happen if the group practices one or more of the living techniques of dialogue.

Insight Dialogue Guidelines Summary

<https://metta.org/insight-dialogue-3/>

1. **Commit to process:** Bring your full energy to this process and to each moment.
2. **Pause-Relax-Open (PRO):** Before you speak, stop and breathe, and then open yourself to wonder and awe.
3. **Trust Emergence:** Allow whatever is supposed to happen, to happen. Expect surprise.
4. **Speak the truth:** Listen deeply and speak with confidence, but discernment and presence.
5. **Notice inter-reactivity:** Be aware of the reactive nature of mind and the tendency of people to fall back upon habitual responses to each other or to ideas.
6. **Release roles:** With humility, move beyond the surface personality, titles and roles.
7. **Surface assumptions:** With creativity, see beyond the presuppositions and tangles of mind.
8. **Observe judgments:** Recognize the endless flow of judgments that come to mind.
9. **Share parallel thinking:** Become aware of the constantly arising stream of thoughts and feelings and have the courage to share them.