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# "Dialogue Starter Kit"


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## Introduction

Conversation can serve as a form of experiential learning to enhance innovation. Dialogue is one form of conversation. Dialogues expand a conversational space through intentional discovery and by occurring over time. Distinct from debate where people try to "win" against others, dialogue encourages participants to build on each other's ideas, expanding the possibilities among participants. Dialogue holds potential for untangling complex issues, especially among people with different values and belief systems. Therefore, intentionally practicing dialogue can foster potential for discovery, innovation and fair resolution in circumstances where different stakeholders must work together to find common ground. This material instructs a process for teaching and learning dialogue skills. Written for faculty teaching business ethics at the undergraduate level, the material can easily be adapted for a variety of audiences.

Resources

I. Designs for teaching dialogue
II. Suggested scripts for each design
    a. Design A: Dialogue for discovery
    b. Design B: Dialogue practice for debaters
    c. Design C: Observing your way into dialogic thinking
III. Annotated bibliography: Resources and supporting articles

Appendices

Appendix A: Dialogue Activity Handout
Appendix B: *Mix and Meet* – An Icebreaker Exercise
Appendix C: Possible Reflective Questions
Appendix D: Training People to Use the Dialogue Worksheet
Appendix E: Blank Dialogue Worksheet

## Designs for Teaching Dialogue

Dialogue, as a form of conversation, contrasts with debate and argumentation, more common forms of conversation. In dialogue, people seek to discover new possibilities over time; in debate, participants seek to argue each other down until one party "loses" against the other. Where debate builds off of "either"/"or" thinking, dialogue rests on the possibility of "both" one idea "and" a seemingly contradictory idea being true at the same time in different ways. For both/and thinking to occur, participants need to collaborate, to uncover underlying assumptions about each other's worldviews, and to inquire into the possibility of "what else might also be true?" This Dialogue Starter Kit offers three designs for teaching and practicing these skills in undergraduate collegiate conversations. The designs are highly adaptable for other audiences.

***Design A: Dialogue for Discovery.*** This design organizes **stand-alone discovery conversations,** for example among students from a variety of disciplines or campus organizations, among community members interested in a particular civic issue, or among parent-teacher groups imagining local school policies. This design emphasizes discovery. It can be used for a single session or for a sequence of sessions.

***Design B: Dialogue Practice for Debaters.*** This design serves as a **companion to debate**. The emphasis is on juxtaposing the "both/and" thinking required for successful dialogue with the "either/or" argumentation common in debate. In this way, Design B seeks to expand awareness in people skilled at debating or arguing with each other.

***Design C: Observing Your Way into Dialogic Thinking.*** This design provides otherwise passive **audience members** with an activity for honing critical inquiry and reflection skills while listening to others speak or debate. By orienting observers to dialogic thinking and offering them a worksheet, listeners can actively practice thinking skills useful for expanding possibilities.

Each design engages participants in using dialogue as a form of conversational learning to expand imaginative capacity. **Designs A** and **B** assume a facilitator will orient participants to the sessions' objectives, possibly demonstrate the skills to be practiced, and then intervene verbally only in support of skills building. The approach supports people in learning new behaviors by experimenting with others in conversation. Designs A and B assume a **60-90 minute** dialogue session not including orientation time. **Design C** assumes that a debate or speech will be occurring during which the audience would normally be silent listeners. When listening, many people become mentally passive. Therefore, this design structures a way for one or more audience members to actively engage in the mental process required for imaginative dialogue even though they are not aurally participating. Small group discussion could easily follow if time permits.

Designs can be combined or further modified for particular events. See the annotated bibliography for theoretical explanations undergirding dialogue and experiential learning theory.

***Process for All Designs:*** Dialogue is a process. A dialogue group might convene one time or multiple times for a particular activity; groups might have consistent membership or varied mix-matched configurations over multiple sessions. And, if a group convenes for a single dialogue session, the operating assumption is that whatever happens during that session inherently becomes part of each individual's on-going dialogic discovery process lasting far longer than a particular session. With that said, this section turns facilitator attention to designing discrete sessions with clear beginnings and endings.

Structuring beginnings and endings and insisting on ground rules for discussion can foster psychological safety for and among participants and can thereby increase the authenticity of the dialogic work. Begin a session with a "**check-in**," a pause during which each participant briefly shares their name and a way in which they have had experience with learning in conversation. This serves two purposes. First, by virtue of each participant having voiced something, the likelihood of each person engaging aloud increases. Second, by asking participants to share an experience of conversational learning, the culture of the group becomes seeded with the idea that learning and discovery may occur through purposeful conversation.

Next, establish basic **ground rules**. Useful ones include: using "I" statements; only posing questions to which you genuinely want to know an answer (this avoids advice or criticism veiled in the form of a question like 'How can you possibly think that?'); listen actively and without interrupting (e.g., "hear each other out"); and "share the air" (this avoids diatribes, monologues, and one person dominating the direction of the whole).

Then, begin dialogue with an open ended **question or a situational prompt**. This allows the group members to join each other around a common theme before diverging in many directions. Ultimately, each dialogue group goes a unique direction, many times ending with little clear idea of an "answer." In fact, the purpose of dialogue is discovery, not necessarily clear resolution. Therefore, anytime a participant poses an either/or question, the participant is shifting *away* from a dialogic stance. Refocus each other towards both/and possibilities. (Note: see annotated bibliography for suggested cases about ethical business conduct.)

Close with a "**check-out**." Even if each participant only shares one word, the check-out puts a symbolic boundary around the dialogue session. This is a good time for a facilitator to remind participants that the larger dialogue itself will continue through reflection and other conversations over time, whether formally or informally.

Suggested scripts and handouts follow. Design A positions dialogue as its own form of conversation. Design B positions dialogue as juxtaposed to debate. Design C engages otherwise passive observers of debate in the mental exercise of considering dialogic possibilities. All three designs are highly adaptable.

## Designs and Suggested Scripts

### Design A: Dialogue for Discovery

*Instructions:* Organize participants into groups of 5-7 people (do not let groups grow larger than 12 participants or individuals' ability to engage aloud will be diminished). Introduce the experience and then hand out Appendix A: Dialogue Activity Handout for individuals' reference. Consider demonstrating the skills to practice if necessary. A sample introductory script follows.

*Sample script:*

"Welcome, I'm _____ and my role here is to introduce you to a form of conversational learning known as 'dialogue.' I will explain it, and suggest some skills to practice, and then offer you a place to begin.

Dialogue implies a sequence of conversations aimed at discovery through curiosity and critique. In a dialogue, success is characterized by new perspectives emerging among participants, perspectives which might emerge over time rather than during a particular exchange.

Many of us know when we have been engaged in a frustrating conversation, one where we sought to argue a point of view with someone who held a different perspective, or when we found ourselves becoming more and more aggressive in order to get our point heard by a group. And yet, some of us know too when we have had rich experiences with others, what Irish poet John O'Donahue describes as: *"not two intersecting monologues, which most conversations pass for these days, but a conversation in which you overheard yourself saying things you never heard yourself say before, in which you heard words from the other that found places in you that you never knew existed, and that continued to sing within you for days afterwards."* These rich experiences characterize dialogue that can increase the human component of business in society.

Here are three specific things each of us can practice in order to foster dialogue:

I. **Presence** – show up in the here-and-now, aware of your thoughts, your emotions, your sensory experience and the meanings you are making of whatever emerges. When you are fully present, you know what you think and feel, and you also have space for others to know what they think and feel.

II. **Curiosity** – get interested in the expertise and wisdom inherent in the other. Curiosity is an attitude, not just a set of questions; it requires an on-going desire to explore and to know.

III. **Simultaneity** (both/and) – because human experience shapes how and what any individual knows, believes and values, remember that multiple perspectives of reality can exist at the same time. What if both your opinion and my opinion are true, in different ways? In this way, dialogue can be seen as a conversation with a center, not sides.

Practice these skills and see if you find places that you never knew existed.

*Implementation*: After introducing the experience, facilitators should discuss ground rules with the collective before asking groups to check-in with their group members. If a single group is convening, consider doing the check-in before discussing ground rules. Groups should be told the approximate amount of time they have for discussion and then the facilitator should give groups a 10 minute warning before time concludes, ensuring that group members have time to check-out before concluding the discussion and ending on time.

**Design B: Dialogue Practice for Debaters**

*Instructions:* This design assumes that participants already identify with particular others, such as teammates in a competition or advocates of particular sides of an argument. The design also assumes that value will come from mixing up the pre-existing teams or sides. In doing so, the design seeks to make opponents into collaborators. The collaborative, cross-team configuration becomes the "dialogue group." All pre-defined teammates should be separated into unique dialogue groups. See Appendix B: Mix and Meet for a sample ice-breaker activity that serves to form new dialogue groups. If using this design in conjunction with a debate competition (or other form of on-going position taking), reconvene the dialogue groups intermittently (see Appendix C for suggested reflection questions) such that participants experience the contrasting ways they can encounter each other over time: dialogically and argumentatively. (Note: This material was originally developed for use at a collegiate debate tournament. The dialogue groups mix-matched the 10 schools' debaters at the beginning of the tournament and at a common meal time after multiple rounds of position-taking in order for participants to both compete through debate and discover or "unpack" issues through intermittent dialogue.) A sample introductory script follows.

*Sample Script:*

> "Welcome – I am (facilitator's name) and my role here is to introduce you to a form of conversation and discussion *different* from the debating at which you are all well versed. This session is on *Dialogue*. First, I will explain dialogue and contrast it with debate. Then I will highlight three skills important to practice during dialogue.
>
> Debate implies a structured format for argumentation between advocates of reasoned, analytical perspectives. Teams often argue for or against a statement, or argue the merits of a single focused perspective. In debate, one person or team "wins," meaning one has a more reasoned or clearly articulated perspective than another.
>
> Dialogue is different. Dialogue implies a sequence of conversations aimed at discovery through curiosity and critique. In a dialogue, winning is characterized by new perspectives emerging among participants, perspectives which might emerge over time rather than during a particular exchange.

In reality, the issues we face are far more complex than advocating a focused affirmative or negative position. Therefore, we introduce here a companion skill set called dialogue. For now, we will focus on this alternative form of conversation.

Dialogue stands in contrast to those frustrating conversations, ones where we sought to argue a point of view with someone who held a different perspective, or when we found ourselves becoming more and more aggressive in order to get our point heard by a group. Conversation can also, sometimes, become a rich experience, one that mirrors what Irish poet John O'Donahue describes as: "*not two intersecting monologues, which most conversations pass for these days, but a conversation in which you overheard yourself saying things you never heard yourself say before, in which you heard words from the other that found places in you that you never knew existed, and that continued to sing within you for days afterwards."* These rich experiences characterize dialogue that can increase the human component of business in society.

Here are three specific things each of us can practice in order to foster dialogue:

I. **Presence** – show up in the here-and-now, aware of your thoughts, your emotions, your sensory experience and the meanings you are making of whatever emerges. When you are fully present, you know what you think and feel, and you also have space for others to know what they think.

II. **Curiosity** – get interested in the expertise and wisdom inherent in the other. Curiosity is an attitude, not just a set of questions; it requires an on-going desire to explore and to know.

III. **Simultaneity** (both/and) – because human experience shapes how and what any individual knows, believes and values, remember that multiple perspectives of reality can exist at the same time. What if both your opinion and my opinion are true, in different ways? In this way, dialogue can be seen as a conversation with a center, not sides."

*Implementation:* After introducing the experience, facilitators should discuss ground rules particularly important because participants are assumed to be skilled in a very different form of conversation, namely debate. If a single group is convening, consider doing the check-in before discussing ground rules. Groups should be told the approximate amount of time they have for discussion and then the facilitator should give groups a 10 minute warning before time concludes, ensuring that group members have time to check-out before concluding the discussion and ending on time.

**Design C: Practicing Dialogic Thinking while Listening to Debate**

*Instructions:* This section generates a third possibility, encouraging dialogic thinking in listeners. When watching a debate or listening to a speech, people often become quite passive.

Therefore, the design makes an activity out of listening. Equipped with a brief orientation and a tailored worksheet, participants learn through reflective observation (contrasted with Designs A and B which concentrate on learning through experimentation). A suggested orienting script follows; facilitators should adapt the script to fit the actual event participants will be watching. See Appendix D for a sample training worksheet and Appendix E for a sample blank worksheet.

*Sample Script*:

> "Shortly, many of us will be the audience for [specify event name]. Rather than just watch or listen, we are going to experiment with an activity to advance your imaginative capacity, your ability to discover and to imagine possibilities far beyond what are presented. As we listen to today's [debate], simultaneously try to discover what else – besides what you hear – might also be true.
>
> Here's why that discovery skill is important. In a debate, one side tries to "win" against another by making the most reasoned and clear analysis of a decision, by arguing better than the other team. But in the real world, collaboration makes for innovative solutions. In the 'real world', imagining "what else might also be true" brings the big prizes, not arguing down another side. "Dialogue" *is* that conversational style that leads to imaginative solutions. Therefore, it's important to notice dialogue in contrast to the argumentative tone of debate.
>
> Dialogue implies a sequence of conversations aimed at discovery (through curiosity and critique). In a dialogue, winning is characterized by new perspectives emerging among participants, perspectives which might emerge over time rather than during a particular exchange.
>
> A core element to practicing dialogue is simultaneity – "both/and" thinking. Our experience shapes how and what any individual knows, believes and values. In daily reality, one person often remembers something quite differently than another person. Both people can be "right" from the perspective of their own experience. An assumption in dialogue is that my reality and your reality might both be true, and might each offer insight for a more imaginative and collective whole. In this way, dialogue can be seen as a conversation with a center, not sides.
>
> To practice dialogue skills, try listening to today's [debate] with an ear towards 'what else might also be true?' I'll distribute a worksheet that supports this experience of moving from debate to dialogue. The practice worksheet describes a business ethics situation and highlights the affirmative and negative response positions. Dialogic questions are then posed in contrast with mock possible responses illustrated.
>
> After practicing with the mock case, get a clean worksheet with which to track your insights as we listen to today's [debate]."

*Implementation:* Depending on time, intention, and the event, a dialogue group session might follow to build on the worksheet experience.

## Annotated Bibliography: Resources and Supporting Articles

### *General guidance for everyone practicing dialogue and conversation*

Kahn, Michael. "The Seminar." (Unpublished paper, 1974. See also Kahn, M., "The Seminar: An Experiment in Humanistic Education." *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 21(2), 119-127, Spring 1981.)

Summary: Kahn describes the behaviors and conduct of a dialogue group/seminar in terms of "barn-raising", the Amish community tradition of collaborating to build a barn for a member of the community; and contrasts barn raising with "beauty contests", an experience where each individual parades his or her best features to compete against others.

### *Resources for faculty and facilitators*

Neville, Mary Grace. (2008). "Using Appreciative Inquiry and Dialogical Learning to Explore ***Dominant*** Paradigms," *Journal of Management Education*. 32:1, February. pp. 100-117.

Summary: Neville explains learning theory and the role of reflective thinking as means of creating "experience" for using dialogue as experiential learning. The article also outlines a semester long course in which dialogue can be used to foster deeper student-understanding of the interdependencies between business and society.

Kolb, David A. (1984). *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. Englewood Cliffs, NY, Prentice Hall.

Summary: Kolb details two dimensions along which learning occurs, apprehension that occurs in experience to theory, and comprehension that occurs through experimentation to reflection. The interaction between and among a variety of learning experiences proves to be highly effective. Data supports where confluence exists among peoples' preferences in various professions, academic disciplines, and contexts.

### *Supporting articles for students and participants*

Ayres, Ed. (1994). "The History of a Cup of Coffee." *World Watch*, September/October, 1994.

Summary: Ayres illustrates the complexity inherent in ethical decision making by sketching the interdependencies between business and society in a simple cup of coffee.

### *Websites listing business ethics cases useful as dialogue prompts*

- Business Ethics, www.businessethics.ca
- The Institute for Global Ethics, http://www.globalethics.org/
- Utah Valley University Center for the Study of Ethics, www.uvsc.edu/ethics
- Texas Independent Colleges Foundation

Appendix A: Dialogue Activity Handout

*Three dialogue skills to practice:*

1. **Presence** – show up in the here-and-now, aware of your thoughts, your emotions, your sensory experience and the meanings you are making of whatever emerges.

2. **Curiosity** – get interested in the expertise and wisdom inherent in the other.

3. **Simultaneity** (both/and) – because human experience shapes how and what any individual knows, believes and values, remember that multiple perspectives of reality can exist at the same time.

*Our organizing focus for practicing dialogue today:*

Today's global economy is highly interdependent and complicated at both local and global levels. Business and society overlap in many ways. Given this reality, how can businesses both meet the bottom line objectives and also be sustainable for society?

Appendix B: *Mix and Meet* – An Ice Breaker Exercise

This exercise structures a 15 minute ice-breaking activity for bringing together mix-matched dialogue groups comprised of people who are otherwise competitors or adversaries. For example, when schools field debate teams for a debate tournament, dialogue groups would be comprised of one student from each of five different debate teams such that the competitive teams are temporarily subordinated. The exercise has two objectives: to help new group members find some common ground, and to seed people's awareness with thoughts of conversation.

*Instructions*: Pre-define discussion groups into approximately 3 to 7 people none of whom also belong to the same competitive team. Post multiple copies of the discussion group membership lists such that individuals can find which discussion group they belong to and the names of other individuals in their discussion group. Provide each participant with the table below (easily adapted for specific events).

---

"Mix and Meet"

This event encourages discussion among students from different schools' teams. Every student has been invited into a discussion group with peers from different schools. First, **discover** who is in your discussion group and list their names in the first column below. Then, **find** each person and **learn** about them (some suggested questions appear below). **Record** notes here about what you learn here so that you have context for remembering each person.

Suggested questions to ask others in your group:

- What is your major in college?
- What, if anything, is your past experience with debate? (Remember, this could range from "I was the captain of the state champion debate team last year," to "I like to argue with my Dad.")
- Debate is one way we engage people. But thinking about other ways, can you think of a time when you had a really engaging conversation with someone? What was the conversation about? What made that conversation interesting for you?

| Group Members' Names | *Name* | *What you learn about your group members* |
|---|---|---|
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |

## Appendix C: Possible Reflective Questions

Reflective Questions

- What did you learn in the debate match? Where did your group's curiosity lead you in dialogue?
- Which themes or case did you find most interesting today? Why?
- Was there a case/situation when you didn't agree with what someone else said (a teammate, a competitor, a judge, etc.)? Tell each other about that situation listening for ways that you *and* the other person night both be "right".
- What assumptions (i.e., truths that you believe) does your perspective rest on? What assumptions do you suspect the *others'* perspective probably rests on?
- What else might also be true?

Appendix D: Training People to use the Dialogue Worksheet

*Sample script:*

"This activity asks everyone to practice advancing our collective imaginative capacity by leveraging the upcoming debate and simultaneously engaging in mental discovery about what else – besides what you hear – might also be true. In a debate, a clear 'either/or' solution is argued. But in dialogue, multiple alternative possibilities are sought. Therefore, read through the following business ethics debate case. Take a brief look at the 'Yes' argument and then at the 'No' arguments. Then, imagine what else might also be true."

Business Ethics Debate Case

*GE has the majority of the market in India for ultrasound machines, a technology which has increased the quality of pre-natal care for the poorest of India's citizens.*

*The preference for male children in India led to the Prenatal Determination Act of 1994, banning the use of ultrasound machines for sex-selective abortion. Obstetric clinics are required to register their ultrasound machines with the government and to sign an affidavit indicating that sex-selective abortions will not be performed.*

*However, "according to a UNICEF report released in December 2006, about 7,000 fewer girls than expected are born daily in India, and about 10 million fewer girls than expected were born in the past 20 years…"* *(Gupta, AFP/Yahoo!News, 9/29/07).*

*GE educates its sales personnel regarding this issue and requires that each ultrasound customer sign an affidavit from GE indicating the ultrasound machine will not be used to determine the sex of the child. In addition, GE performs periodic audits on clinics to ensure compliance.*

Debate Question -- Does GE have a responsibility to ensure that their ultrasound machines are not used for sex-selection?

Case provided courtesy of Texas Independent Colleges Foundation Ethics Match 2009.

Competing debate teams have taken two opposing positions on the above case and argued each position well in the eyes of debate judges.

- Position 1: No, GE has no responsibility to ensure that their products are only used for the purposes designed.
- Position 2: Yes, GE has an obligation to society to remain engaged in their entire product's life cycle, from design through use and to discard and disposal.

To shift the debate positions into a dialogic stance, ask these questions about each position:

- What ideals or obligations must be true for this argument to make sense?
- What other ideals or obligations do you see?
- What might be an implication if indeed that argument was to be true?
- What questions does that implication raise for you?

The dialogue worksheet guides you through that thought process. Listen for statements made during the debate. Allow provocative statements to become propositions for **Column 1: If…** Next, apply your critical inquiry skills to imagine that, if the proposition were to be considered true, then what implications might that proposition suggest? This gets represented in **Column 2: Then…** Next, follow the logical path of implications. If the proposition or assertion were to be true, and a particular implication follows, what question(s) emerge for you about how the world might look different than if a different proposition were being entertained? Raise that question in **Colum 3: Therefore, what about…**

Here is an example of how the worksheet might be completed based on debate responses to the GE case. Read the table across rows.

| If… | Then…. | Therefore, what about… |
|---|---|---|
| GE is not responsible for how their product gets used | Who else is not responsible for their products (cigarette makers, weapon makers)? | How do we, at a society level, ensure that innocent people stay safe? |
| (same) | If the product goes into a waste dump, then you're suggesting "no harm no foul" by GE | …our common interest in encouraging recyclable materials so that the natural environment doesn't get ruined? |
| GE has to remain engaged in how their product gets used, beyond just getting a signature on sale. | Where does the consumer's right to use a product freely begin? | How can we encourage innovation that might occur as someone experiments with how a product might add value beyond its original design? |
| Additional issues this debate raises for me include…<br>• I wonder if I would feel differently if I lived in a planned economy rather than a free-market economy. | | |

Appendix E: Blank Dialogue Worksheet

Extend the debate/speech into a dialogue. Listen with an intention of discovering what else might also be true. Track your insights and questions legibly here. Then compare what you noticed with what others noticed.

| If… | Then…. | Therefore, what about… |
|---|---|---|
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| Additional issues this debate raises for me include… | | |