

# DIALOGUE v. DEBATE

## MATERIALS |

Dialogue v. Debate Visualization Exercise (see appendix)

OPTIONAL: Dialogue handouts (see appendix)

**OBJECTIVES |** The objective of this activity is for participants to understand the difference between dialogue and debate so that they can begin communicating with each other in ways that are closer to dialogue than debate.

## FACILITATOR INSTRUCTIONS |

Lead students in Dialogue v. Debate Visualization Exercise (See Appendix)

Ask: “Which of these two experiences do we usually have when having controversial conversations?”

Explain the difference between dialogue and debate:

- Often when we have conversations in which there are disagreements they end up in debates in which one person is trying to prove their point or win the argument. Debate is competitive and usually emphasizes winning or having only one right answer. In a debate you usually feel disconnected from others and perhaps angry, sad, frustrated, anxious or afraid.
- In contrast, in dialogue the goal is to listen deeply to the other person’s perspective and to try to understand where the other person is coming from, even if you don’t fully agree with them. The goal of dialogue is to develop trusting relationships and to feel more connected to and understanding of each other. Dialogue requires that we be curious about each other and interested in learning about other’s experiences and perspectives.
- Unfortunately, most people tend to communicate using debate instead of dialogue. In our time together we are going to work hard to shift to engaging in dialogue instead of debate.

## DEBRIEF QUESTIONS |

- What did it feel like to do this activity?
- How could using dialogue be helpful in our class?
- What can we do when we notice we debating instead of dialoguing?

## NOTES |

EXTENSION: Invite participants to practice having a conversation using their new understanding of dialogue skills (see “How to Listen” activity for ideas).



## SUPPORTING MEDIA |

<https://www.michiganlearning.org/building-foundational-skills/>

# Dialogue v. Debate Visualization

*I am going to lead you through two different scenarios. If you feel comfortable, please close your eyes while I read them. If not, please simply look toward the floor so that you don't see anyone else during the visualization. At the end of each I will ask you to pause for a few seconds and think about how you are feeling. We will have a brief discussion following both the scenarios.*

**1st Visualization:** Imagine a conversation you are having with a friend, a classmate, a family member, or even a small group of people. Things are getting heated in the conversation. Lots of different opinions and perspectives are coming out, and the perspectives are contrary to each other. You are feeling excited but soon start feeling that it is hard to get a word in. The other people have very strong opinions. When you share your own perspectives, you are interrupted and basically told that your argument is invalid. You start noticing a shift in how you are participating in the conversation too. You start finding flaws in others' arguments. You start being forceful about your own perspective in an attempt to prove your point. There is a sense that there is only one right answer. After a while, realizing that no one is really listening to each other, you start disengaging from the conversation. You start having an internal dialogue with yourself, judging yourself and judging the other people in the conversation. You are so frustrated and upset you want to leave the group.

*Think about how you are feeling in this situation for a few moments.*

[PAUSE FOR 30-40 SECONDS]

*Now, feel free to open your eyes and quietly think about this scenario. (If you like, you may jot down how you were feeling and what you were thinking in this visualization.)*

[PAUSE FOR 20-30 SECONDS]

*Now close your eyes once more or look down so that you do not see anyone else in the room.*

**2nd Visualization:** Now I would like you to imagine another conversation. Perhaps it is a continuation of the last conversation or a completely new one with different people. Like the last one, you are having an exciting conversation where you and others are raising some interesting points. Many of the perspectives shared are different from each other and sometimes contradict each other. However, as you share your own perspective, perhaps nervously because it is different from what most people in the group think, others are curious and ask you to elaborate on what you are saying. As you share more, some people start reflecting on their own opinions. They say what you shared has made them think harder about their own perspectives. You start asking them how they formed their opinions. You realize that in a way, you all hold some truth about the issue. You all start sharing from the heart and bring in your own different lives and experiences to the conversation. You begin to realize how the issue impacts some of you in similar ways and others differently. Even though you hold different perspectives, you feel connected to the others in the group, engaged in the conversation, and you realize that there is much more to the issue than you had first thought.

*Think about how you are feeling in this situation for a few moments.*

[PAUSE FOR 30-40 SECONDS]

*Now, feel free to open your eyes and quietly think about this scenario. (If you like, you may jot down how you were feeling and what you were thinking in this visualization.)*

Invite some participants to share how they felt during the first scenario. Affirm the responses, ask for elaborations if needed. Try to keep the responses brief. If participants start sharing too much of details of the situation, say that you would just like them to focus on their feelings.

Invite other participants (who haven't shared yet) to share how they felt during the second scenario. Again, affirm the responses, ask for elaborations if needed, and try to keep the responses brief.

Ask: "Which of these two experiences do we usually have when having controversial conversations?"

If you want, you can pass out and explain one of the following handouts

Adapted from University of Michigan Intergroup Dialogue National Institute (2013) .

# Debate v. Dialogue

Assuming that there is one right answer and that you have it

Combative—participants attempt to prove the other side wrong

About winning

Listening to find flaws and make counterarguments

Defending assumptions as truth

Critiquing the other side's position

Defending one's own views against those of others

Searching for flaws and weaknesses in other positions

Seeking a conclusion or vote that ratifies your position

Assuming that many people have pieces of the answer and that only together can they craft a solution

Collaborative—participants work together toward common understanding

About learning

Listening to understand and find meaning

Revealing assumptions for reevaluation

Reexamining all positions

Admitting that others' thinking can improve one's own

Searching for strengths and value in others' positions

Discovering new opinions, not seeking closure

Adapted from Daniel Yankelovich (1999)

# Discussion | Debate | Dialogue

In DISCUSSION we try to...	In DEBATE we try to...	In DIALOGUE we try to...
Present ideas	Succeed or win	Broaden our own perspective
Seek answers and solutions	Look for weakness	Look for shared meaning
Persuade others	Stress disagreement	Find places of agreement
Enlist others	Defend our opinion	Express paradox and ambiguity
Share information	Focus on 'right' and 'wrong'	Bring out areas of ambivalence
Solve our own and others' problems	Advocate one perspective or opinion	Allow for and invite differences of opinion and experience
Give answers	Search for flaws in logic	Discover collective meaning
Achieve preset goals	Judge other viewpoints as inferior, invalid or distorted	Challenge ourselves and others' preconceived notions
Acknowledge feelings, then discount them as inappropriate	Deny others' feelings	Explore thoughts and feelings
Listen for places of disagreement	Listen with a view of countering	Listen without judgment and with a view to understand
Avoid feelings	Discount the validity of feelings	Validate others' experiences and feelings
Avoid areas of strong conflict and difference	Focus on conflict and difference as advantage	Articulate areas of conflict and difference
Retain relationships	Disregard relationships	Build relationships
Avoid silence	Use silence to gain advantage	Honor silence

Adapted by Tanya Kachwaha 2002 from Huang-Nissan (1999) and Consultant/TrainersSouthwest (1992)