

How to Have Difficult Conversations, Or, How to be Civil While Being Civically Engaged

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*Graphic Language Warning: The speaker reserves the right to use 'colorful' and or graphic language at times, often uncontrollably, and perhaps just to make you uncomfortable.



Civic Engagement \ 'si-vik in- 'gāj-mənt\

n. individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern

• **Civic**

• **Electoral**

• **Political**

• **Attentiveness**

• **Social**

However... In the classroom, office, or across campus, we can be caught by surprise, which leaves us feeling a bit... What?



And this can make us want to...



So how do we engage in a meaningful way?

- It begins with you
 - Understand your own inherent biases and assumptions
 - Know your opinion and worldview
 - Be prepared mentally
 - **BE COMFORTABLE WITH ALL THIS**



Create a Safe Environment

- It is your classroom
 - Be the authority figure – you are the expert
 - Do not back away from questions or comments
 - Provide context, meaning, perspective
 - Help students know their views are respected
 - Correct misinformation as needed
 - Be prepared to improvise
- Remember: YOU are in control
 - You can control the dialog and reactions



Promote Active Listening

- To engage in a difficult dialog, you must hear what others are saying
- By listening first, then you can respond to provide perspective
- Encourage students to share their perspective
 - Validate positions/perspectives/opinions
 - Offer context
 - Counter with alternatives
- Control your own emotional response
 - We can disagree without being disagreeable



Avoid Divisive Language

- Be empathetic and compassionate
 - Place yourself in the other persons shoes
 - Try to understand from their perspective
- Empathy/Compassion Provides Perspective
 - Respond by using positive or shared language
 - Use broad and inclusive terms
 - Avoid attacking or berating
- Find those 'teachable' moments



Find Balance

- Shielding

- Trigger warnings, safe spaces, political correctness, micro-aggressions
- How does this impact thought and flow of information?
- Are we doing a disservice to students?

- Free Speech

- How do we balance free speech with thoughtful dialog/discussion within the classroom setting?



Tackling Belief Systems

- Dichotomy – Lack of Knowledge vs. Preferences
 - Short-cuts and cues leave space for misinformation to fester
 - Beliefs are sticky and difficult to change
- Inform and Guide
 - Do not try to change beliefs



COMPARING DEBATE, DISCUSSION AND DIALOGUE*

	DEBATE <i>"Might is right"</i>	DISCUSSION <i>"The noisier, the smarter"</i>	DIALOGUE <i>"Connectivity for community"</i>
PARADIGM FOR COMMUNICATING ACROSS DIFFERENCE	Debate is oppositional: two sides oppose each other and attempt to prove each other wrong. Debate assumes that there is a right answer and that someone has it. In debate, personal experience is secondary to a forceful opinion.	Discussion tends to contribute to the formation of abstract notion of community. In discussion, personal experience and actual content are often seen as separate.	Dialogue is collaborative: two or more sides work together toward common understanding. In dialogue, personal experience is a key avenue for self-awareness and political understanding.
	Debate creates closed-minded attitude, a determination to be right. Individuals are considered to be autonomous and judged on individual intellectual might.	Discussions often assume an "equal playing field" with little or no attention to identity, status and power.	In dialogue (esp. IGD) exploring identities and differences are key elements in both the process and the content of the exchange.
SELF-ORIENTATION	In debate, one submits one's best thinking and defends it against challenge to show that it is right. Debate calls for investing wholeheartedly in one's beliefs. Debate defends assumptions as truth. Debate defends one's own positions as the best solution and excludes other solutions. Debate affirms a participant's own point of view.	Discussions are often conducted with the primary goal of increasing clarity and understanding of the issue with the assumption that we are working with a stable reality. In discussion, individual contributions often center around "rightness" and be valued for it. In discussion, the impact may often be identified and processed individually and outside of the group setting.	In dialogue, one submits one's best thinking, knowing that other peoples' reflections will help improve it rather than destroy it. Dialogue calls for temporarily suspending judgments. Dialogue reveals assumptions and biases for reevaluation. Dialogue causes introspection on one's own position.
OTHER-ORIENTATION	In debate, one listens to the other side in order to find flaws and to counter its arguments. Debate causes critique of the other position. In debate, one searches for glaring differences. In debate, one searches for flaws and weaknesses in the other position.	In discussion, one listens only to be able to insert one's own perspective. Discussion is often serial monologues. Discussion tends to encourage individual sharing, sometimes at the expense of listening to and inquiring about others' perspectives.	In dialogue, one listens to the other side(s) in order to understand, find meaning, and points of connection. Dialogue involves a real concern for the other person and seeks to not alienate but yet speak what is true for oneself. In dialogue, one searches for strengths in the other positions. Dialogue creates an openness to learning from mistakes and biases.
EMOTIONS IN THE PROCESS	Debate involves a countering of the other position without focusing on feelings or relationship and often belittles or deprecates the other person.	In discussion, emotional responses may be present but are seldom named and may be unwelcome. Discussion is centered on content not affect related to content.	In dialogue, emotions help deepen understanding of personal, group and intergroup relationship issues. Dialogue works to uncover confusion, contradictions and paradoxes with an aim to deepen understanding.
END-STATE	In debate, winning is the goal. Debate implies a conclusion.	In discussion, the more perspectives voiced, the better. Discussion can be open or close-ended.	Dialogue remains open-ended. In dialogue, finding common ground is the goal.

* compiled and adapted by Ratnesh Nagde, Patricia Guin, Jaclyn Rodriguez & Kelly Maxwell (2008), based on "Differentiating Dialogue from Discussion" a handout developed by Diana Kasila and Todd Sevig (1997) for the Program on Intergroup Relations, Conflict and Community (IGRC), University of Michigan; and, "Comparing Dialogue and Debate," a paper prepared by Shelley Berman, based on discussions of the Dialogue Group of the Boston Chapter of Educators for Social Responsibility (ESR). Other members included Lucile Burt, Dick Mayo-Smith, Lally Stowell, and Gene Thompson.