

Reading Assignment

Creating a Community Across Difference: An Introduction to Dialogue

What does it mean to engage in dialogue? Dialogue is a process through which two or more people work toward mutual exploration of each other's ideas, perspectives, and emotions by listening to each other, acknowledging assumptions, and suspending judgment. Such a process may lead to new understandings and ways of thinking, and it can be particularly impactful when engaging with ideas or opinions that are unfamiliar, potentially upsetting, or controversial.

Most people think that "dialogue" is synonymous with other kinds of verbal exchanges like "debate" and "discussion." It's true that these terms are often used interchangeably, but the definition above shows that the goal and characteristics of dialogue make it distinct from other types of interactions. In debate, participants are trying to win an argument, advocate a specific perspective, look for weakness, and prove the opposing viewpoint is wrong or invalid. In discussion, participants are interested in seeking answers and solutions, sharing information, persuading and enlisting others, and solving problems. As described throughout this overview, in dialogue, participants are interested in broadening their perspective, finding areas of agreement and conflict, learning from differences of opinion and experience, and developing shared meaning.

Undergraduate students (like you!) are constantly exposed to new people and worldviews, making college an ideal environment for developing curiosity and knowledge through dialogue. Your experience in college will extend far beyond the content and skills you learn in lectures, labs, and seminars. Being able to communicate and collaborate across difference, as well as to learn from your own and others' lived experiences, can help you maximize what you gain from your time in college and prepare for your future in an increasingly interconnected world.

HOW?

We unpack the three key elements of dialogue below, providing more detail about working toward understanding by listening, acknowledging assumptions, and suspending judgment. Each section contains examples from Cornell undergraduates describing the knowledge and experience they gained through a semester-long course about dialogue (EDUC 2610: Intergroup Dialogue). We hope that this reading and your session with the Intergroup Dialogue Project (IDP) during Orientation will help you engage fully with a wide range of learning opportunities during your time at Cornell.

Working toward understanding

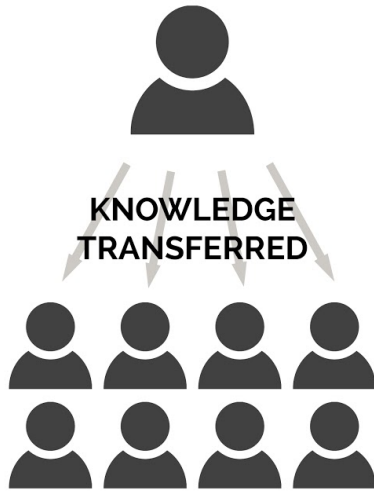
In dialogue, it is imperative that you share your views *and* hear the perspectives of others. The goal is not to agree or convince, but to expose differences, understand the reasons behind them, and collectively explore new or alternative ways to see specific issues. One student described how using dialogue in the classroom, though not always easy, can alleviate some concerns experienced in other academic contexts: *"...I felt initially afraid to address issues I disagreed with and engage in conflict because I was so paranoid I wouldn't speak in a way that was convincing enough... I remembered that is not the goal of dialogue; the purpose of my participation is to have my perspective heard and to explore my own feelings with others. With that in mind, I did build up the courage to speak up with comments I found difficult, but it definitely is a challenge to avoid the tendency to try and convince the other person of my views."*

Dialogue is inherently collaborative: "In dialogue, all participants win or lose together...Those who practice dialogue have come to see that the worst possible way to advance mutual understanding is to win debating points at the expense of others" (Yankelovich, 1999, p. 38). This idea that participants win or lose together underlies a key tenet of dialogue, specifically that everyone participating in the dialogue is essential for the process. Engagement in dialogue is shaped by people's various identities, experiences, and other characteristics that might be associated with differences in power or resources. Differences between people exist, and they contribute to the breadth of perspectives that people share through dialogue. Thus, in dialogue participants work collectively to better understand differences and similarities, unpack conflicts, and collaborate meaningfully across difference. Through collective effort, those participating in a dialogue try to form authentic relationships with one another and achieve shared meaning, even (or especially) when they disagree.

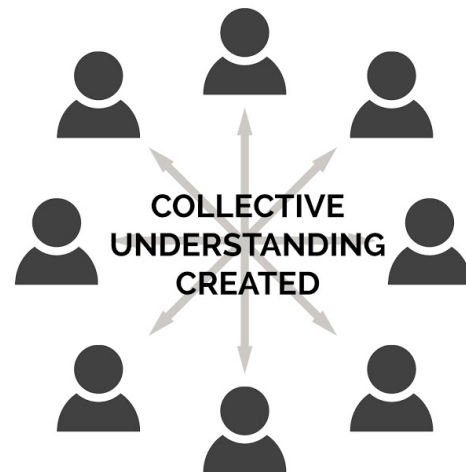
When you imagine the typical format of teaching and learning in college, a traditional classroom setting with one teacher and many students might come to mind. In this imagined classroom, the teacher is the one who holds knowledge and their job is to instill this knowledge in students. Knowledge flowing from the teacher to the students is helpful for specific types of content, but it also leaves very little room for students like you to reciprocate and pass knowledge to your teachers or other students.

In dialogue, every participant is both a teacher and a learner. Instead of established knowledge moving in one direction, pieces of knowledge come from every participant and collectively, a new understanding is created. We call this model co-learning. A co-learning environment is collaborative. Its focus is on the entire group and developing shared meaning while also valuing each member's unique (and even contradictory) contributions (Freire, 1972, Chapter 2). In co-learning, every participant shares the

responsibility of teaching by appropriately contributing their own perspectives, knowledge, and opinions. This responsibility can be daunting, but also rewarding, as described by one Cornell student: *"The slow and thought-out process helped me through the beginning of my journey of awareness-raising and ensured that I felt challenged, but never felt stuck in the process. IDP's emphasis that we are all teachers and learners in life helped me to see the value that my contributions add to the dialogue."*



Traditional teaching/learning model:
One teacher, many learners



Co-Learning:
We are all teachers and learners

People speaking in a dialogue try to use **purposeful sending**, which means communicating messages so that they can be understood by whoever is listening. Like an effective teacher thinks about how their students will best understand the content being taught, you, as a teacher and a learner in dialogue, should keep in mind how the things you're sharing can be best understood by others. By sharing your perspective, you're giving yourself the opportunity to speak honestly and authentically, to describe your own experiences and values, and to challenge the preconceived notions of everyone participating in the dialogue. This typically involves speaking from personal experience, using "I" statements, and articulating your opinions. When you share your perspective, you give others the opportunity to hear what you honestly think, feel, and believe, a chance to be genuinely curious about you as a person, and more information about potential differences and similarities between you.

Listening to each other

For co-learning to occur, each person has to contribute and also take on the role of an open, curious learner. Everyone in dialogue is amenable to growth and has the goal to better understand perspectives that are different from their own, and this usually starts with *listening* to others. **Active listening** is a method of communication that allows each participant to be genuinely heard. When practicing active listening, it is essential to be fully present and engaged with the person(s) speaking. In addition to paying attention to the words that are being said, when you are actively listening you also pay attention to the speaker's tone of voice and emotions, the perspectives and intentions being expressed, and their body language and facial expressions. Active listening is intentional; it takes energy to focus completely on the speaker and to suspend the thoughts inside your head and any other distractions. If you don't think you're an excellent listener, don't worry! This skill can be practiced and developed. Though it requires effort, you'll likely find that the people you're actively listening to respond in a positive way. Another Cornellian had this to say about listening: *"My friends have told me I am not always a great listener, which does not create dialogue if only one person is speaking and does not allow space for others to participate. However, over the past few months I have been using the dialogue skills...to actually participate in meaningful conversations with both my friends and family. I can tell by people's tones of voice and body language that they appreciate when they feel heard."*

Active listening is best combined with empathic listening. **Empathy** has been defined as "the ability to experience the same feelings as someone else. It means identifying with that person, paying attention to that person's feelings and attending to how our own feelings resonate with theirs" (McCormick, 1999, p. 57). Listening with empathy requires your full and generous attention; it means listening with the goal of understanding, not listening for flaws in someone's perspective, not planning a response while another person is still talking. If you have ever listened actively and with empathy (or had someone listen to you in this way) then you may be familiar with how this can lead to genuine, meaningful, and humane connections between people. Whereas in debates and discussions there's a tendency to avoid or invalidate emotions, in dialogue emotions are valued and explored as additional sources of information to better understand people's experiences and build relationships. This student describes the connective potential of empathy: *"When students in our dialogue or people in general share difficult experiences, expressing empathy can decrease their feelings of isolation and make them feel more comfortable sharing thoughts that can greatly enhance the quality and outcome of the dialogue."*

In dialogue, empathy is used to facilitate openness to what someone else is saying. The goal is not to agree with them, necessarily, but to let yourself truly hear their

perspective. Listening with empathy can be a valuable tool when communicating across difference because it helps you, as the listener, better understand what someone believes, why they hold particular views, and how their worldview has been shaped by their experiences and where they come from. One student described listening with empathy as *“extraordinarily enriching because everyone was so different and had so many different experiences to share and bring to the conversation. I learned how much there is to get to know about somebody and the ability to empathize with them even when your values and beliefs don’t align with theirs.”*

Acknowledging assumptions

Typical interactions don’t often require people to recognize the assumptions underlying what’s being said, and it is rarer still to thoughtfully engage with those assumptions if they are articulated. This is yet another way in which dialogue differs from debate, discussion, or even day-to-day conversations: “In dialogue, participants are encouraged to examine their own assumptions and those of other participants. And once these assumptions are in the open, they are not to be dismissed out of hand but considered with respect even when participants disagree with them” (Yankelovich, 1999, p. 44).

Being asked to consider and openly articulate your own assumptions can stimulate reflection on how and why you developed a certain belief, value, or opinion, leading to increased self-understanding. As one student wrote, *“the opportunities I was given to explore my own understanding of the opinions I hold were truly enriching, and the platform of dialogue is what incited me to be able to grow in this self-awareness.”* The possibility for learning extends beyond the self, as well; considering the assumptions of other dialogue participants can aid in understanding: the content of someone else’s perspective; how and why they developed their perspective; and where there might be points of similarity or difference in your own perspective on a given topic or issue.

Suspending judgment

Imagine that you’ve been listening with empathy, giving someone your full attention, and acknowledging assumptions (both your own and the other person’s). And then all of a sudden, this other person says something you absolutely, 100% disagree with. Perhaps your immediate reaction would be, “Wow, what is wrong with you?!” How would that judgment help you get closer to shared understanding? Well...it wouldn’t, and that’s why suspending judgment is critical to practicing dialogue.

People make judgments automatically and with great frequency (as evidenced by extensive research on snap judgments, implicit bias, and heuristics in decision making, among many other fields of research). Very often, people make these judgments *without even realizing it*. This means that dialogue participants often have to challenge

themselves to override their initial reactions: “We need to set aside evaluating whether it is right or wrong or good or bad to feel whatever the other person feels. This is essential, because we can still listen very carefully to others, but if we do it to find weaknesses in their arguments that we can challenge, we won't develop empathy” (McCormick, 1999, p. 58). A Cornellian echoed this sentiment when writing about their experience in our dialogue course: *“One of the first things I learned about myself in communicating with others is how easy it is for me to make prejudgments about individuals that I learned to be inaccurate...The more I learned about my group members’ background, experiences, and beliefs, the more I came to understand and empathize with them whether I believed their beliefs or not.”*

After taking a step back and suspending judgment, you should be able to learn why the other person thinks or believes what they do and why the issue is important for them. You may still find you disagree with what the other person is saying, and this is perfectly okay. The important thing is that you allowed yourself to understand their perspective, thereby broadening your own.

WHERE AND WHEN?

Dialogue can be especially useful when engaging with people who are different from us, when we are challenged by something someone said, or while we are experiencing conflict. For many people, conflict is associated with difficult past experiences and/or negative connotations; in dialogue, however, conflict is seen as a valuable opportunity for growth.

What do we mean by conflict? Though “conflict” can mean a lot of things, some examples include:

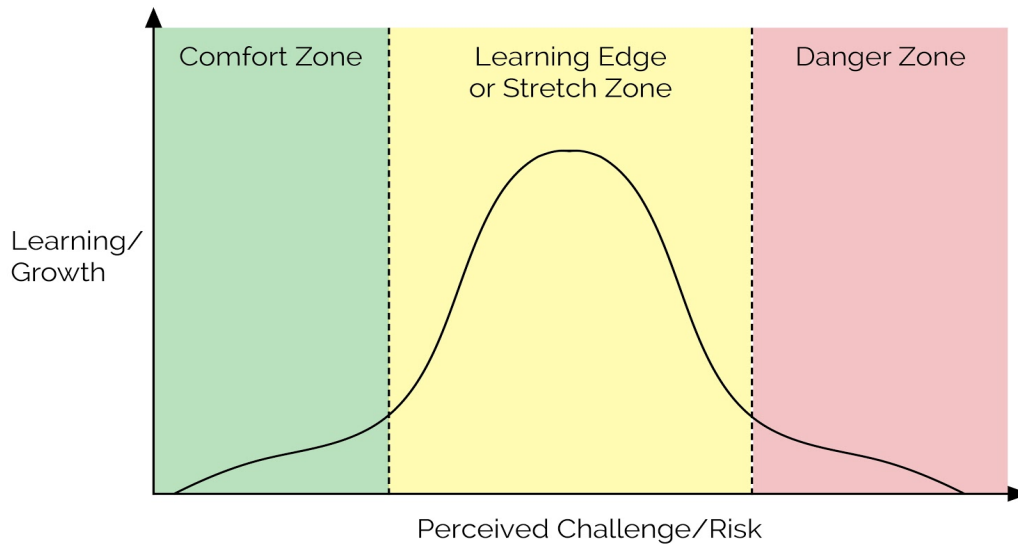
- Your friend spreads a rumor about one of your other friends and you get caught in the middle
- You and your parents can't agree on a reasonable curfew
- A cousin brings up the issue of gun control at a family reunion and people have many differing opinions on the topic
- A teacher says something about immigration that rubs you the wrong way
- You read the comments section of an online article and respond to the comments you find deeply upsetting
- Your class holds a debate on human cloning

Reactions to moments like these may lead to being in one of three cognitive/emotional zones: comfort zone, danger zone, or learning edge. The **comfort zone** is exactly what it sounds like, a comfortable state of being in which you're not feeling challenged or threatened. Although it may feel nice to be in your comfort zone, there are minimal opportunities for learning and growth to occur here. The **danger zone** is also characterized by a lack of learning and growth, but it's because someone in this zone has been pushed too far beyond their comfort zone. Being in the danger zone feels unsafe and this may manifest in you shutting down or withdrawing from an interaction or staying in the interaction but being unable to actively listen or take in any new information.

Thinking about the scenarios described above, someone may react by retreating from the conflict to return to their comfort zone. This may mean concluding a conversation, walking away, agreeing to disagree or even ending a relationship. Another potential reaction would be slipping into a heated argument with the other person. This could look like a screaming match, a prolonged back and forth that goes nowhere, and may also conclude in the end of a relationship. Sometimes there is a "winner" and a "loser," but often we find that we have made no progress and finish where we started. The most extreme confrontations may push us into our danger zones where conflict is no longer productive; learning cannot occur when we are in the danger zone.

The goal in dialogue is to learn from conflict and different perspectives, and this cannot occur in either the comfort zone or danger zone. Instead we encourage ourselves to explore the space between these two extremes, occupying a cognitive and emotional area we call the **learning edge** or **stretch zone**. Here it is possible to challenge yourself to embrace the discomfort that may come with choosing to engage in and learn from conflict: *"During one session, I shared a controversial thought, and I vividly remember being taken aback by the strong disagreement [that] ensued. I hadn't thought or meant to offend anyone. The easy option would have been to shut down and opt out of the rest of dialogue, but instead I was determined to learn from this experience and even though it was challenging, I remained engaged to better understand exactly what it was that my peers disagreed with."*

EMBRACING CONFLICT/DISCOMFORT MINDSET



As another student described: *“Regardless of the challenges...I am happy I put myself in dialogue spaces both in the classroom and beyond. By pushing myself out of my comfort zone and onto my learning edge, I have been able to recognize and interrogate some of my own biases. These moments, along with so many other transformative instances throughout my time dialoguing, have changed the way I interact with the world, and have changed the way I think about my future.”*

WHY?

Cornell undergraduates who’ve spent a semester learning about dialogue find that the tools they practice - listening, acknowledging assumptions, suspending judgment, and challenging themselves to stay on their learning edge - are applicable in a broad range of scenarios. Here are some examples of how students have used dialogue skills in common undergraduate experiences:

- You have a group project and someone isn’t doing as much work as the other members in the group: *“In my group project, when a group member was unhappy with a group dynamic or the quality of another members’ work, we were able to address it in a calm manner that made it easier for the issue to be resolved.”*
- You acknowledge what you already know *and* what more you could learn in a class: *“While it was difficult to admit to myself that I didn’t know everything in an area I thought I knew a lot about, I learned...that there is always value in being genuinely curious because these issues are always changing and growing.”*

Creating a Community Across Difference: An Introduction to Dialogue

- You have a conflict among the people you share a living space with: *“During a conflict with my housemates earlier in the semester, one for which I was at fault, I employed active listening...to help alleviate the situation. I took care to make eye contact with each of my housemates and keep my body language open to ensure they knew I was intently listening to them. I made sure to respond to their comments and concerns...I was amazed by how easy it was to diffuse the budding conflict while at once taking responsibility and being respectful of and to my friends’ feelings.”*
- You eventually become an RA who handles other people’s roommate conflicts: *“Dialoguing with...agitated residents is the best way to calm everyone down, and to get to the actual root of the issue, which usually has to do with a feeling rather than the action itself (feeling disrespected, feeling ignored/unheard, feeling hurt). Once both parties are on the same page about this, there’s often much more empathy from both sides, and much less resentment. This lets them feel better about compromising, which usually leads to them finding a solution that they both agree on.”*
- You find ways to really get close with your friends: *“I am excited to see if I’ll be able to reach new levels of closeness with friends. I’m better at asking questions and I feel more capable of bridging differences with people that I want to keep in my life. It is too easy to cut out a person that has contrasting opinions to oneself, and I wonder if I’d be a more developed human if I had attempted to dialogue with these people rather than shut down communication.”*

You get to make decisions about how to spend your time as a Cornell student. You’ll make big decisions like what to major in, which organizations to join, and where to live. You’ll also make (seemingly) smaller decisions like choosing to introduce yourself to someone you’ve never met before, opting to listen with empathy to a new friend who’s telling you about how much they miss being home with their family, or deciding to suspend judgment when someone voices a political opinion you disagree with in an effort to better understand their perspective. Each of these decisions may seem small in isolation, but they will add up and they will shape how much you let yourself learn, teach, and grow while you’re here. As one student wrote, *“College is a time we grow and discover...it is crucial that we take time to look at where we came from, but also to treasure where we are going, because that can only be chosen by ourselves.”*

*To learn more about the Intergroup Dialogue Project, visit our website:
www.idp.cornell.edu*

REFERENCES

- Arao, B., Clemens, K. (2013). From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces: A New Way to Frame Dialogue Around Diversity and Social Justice. *The Art of Effective Facilitation*. Stylus Publishing, LLC.
- Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York, NY: Herder and Herder.
- McCormick, D. W. (1999). Listening with empathy: Taking the other person's perspective. *NTL Institute for Applied Behavioral Science (8th ed.), Reading Book for Human Relations Training*. Alexandria, VA: NTL Institute for Applied Behavioral Science. 57-60.
- Yankelovich, D. (1999). What makes dialogue unique? *The Magic of Dialogue: Transforming Conflict into Cooperation*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster. 35-57.