

## Comparison of Dialogue and Debate

1. Dialogue is collaborative: two or more sides work together toward common understanding.  
*Debate is oppositional: two sides oppose each other and attempt to prove each other wrong.*
2. In dialogue, finding common ground is the goal.  
*In debate, winning is the goal.*
3. In dialogue, one listens to the other side(s) in order to understand, find meaning, and find agreement.  
*In debate, one listens to the other side in order to find flaws and to counter its arguments.*
4. Dialogue enlarges and possibly changes a participant's point of view.  
*Debate affirms a participant's own point of view.*
5. Dialogue reveals assumptions for reevaluation.  
*Debate defends assumptions as truth.*
6. Dialogue causes introspection on one's own position.  
*Debate causes critique of the other position.*
7. Dialogue opens the possibility of reaching a better solution than any of the original solutions.  
*Debate defends one's own positions as the best solution and excludes other solutions.*
8. Dialogue creates an open-minded attitude: an openness to being wrong and an openness to change.  
*Debate creates a closed-minded attitude, a determination to be right.*
9. In dialogue, one submits one's best thinking, knowing that other peoples' reflections will help improve it rather than destroy it.  
*In debate, one submits one's best thinking and defends it against challenge to show that it is right.*
10. Dialogue calls for temporarily suspending one's beliefs.  
*Debate calls for investing wholeheartedly in one's beliefs.*
11. In dialogue, one searches for basic agreements.  
*In debate, one searches for glaring differences.*
12. In dialogue, one searches for strengths in the other positions.  
*In debate, one searches for flaws and weaknesses in the other position.*
13. Dialogue involves a real concern for the other person and seeks to not alienate or offend.  
*Debate involves a countering of the other position without focusing on feelings or relationship and often belittles or deprecates the other person.*
14. Dialogue assumes that many people have pieces of the answer and that together they can put them into a workable solution.  
*Debate assumes that there is a right answer and that someone has it.*
15. Dialogue remains open-ended.  
*Debate implies a conclusion.*

*Adapted from a paper prepared by Shelly Berman, which was 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. For more information on ESR's programs and resources using dialogue as a tool for dealing with controversial issues, call the national ESR office at (617) 492-1764.*

## Differentiating Dialogue From Discussion: A Working Model (Kardia and Sevig, 1997)

### Discussion

- A.  
*Discussions* are often conducted with the assumption of an equal “playing field,” with little or no acknowledgement of status and power differences in the room.
- B.  
*Discussion* can occur with social inequities and problematic power relations active and uninterrupted during the course of discussion (e.g., individuals with privileged social identities dominating the discussion).
- C.  
Individuals may engage in a *discussion* without an awareness or understanding of how the content of the discussion is related to the personal experiences of those in the room.
- D.  
The impact a *discussion* has on individuals in the room is often identified and processed outside of that room with individuals other than the discussion participants.
- E.  
In *discussion*, emotional responses may be present but are seldom named and may be unwelcome.
- F.  
*Discussion* tends to contribute to the formation of theoretical community—what society in general needs to understand to exist as a collective.
- G.  
*Discussion* is often aimed toward the identification and expression of generalities, frameworks, and collective truths.
- H.  
*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.
- I.  
The goal of individual contributions to *discussion* is to say the “right” (intelligent, polished, etc.) thing.

### Dialogue

- In *dialogue*, these differences are key elements in both the process and the content of the exchange.
- Dialogue* breaks down and becomes untenable if such processes are not interrupted and addressed.
- In *dialogue*, personal experience is one of the key avenues through which participants deepen their understanding of conceptual and political issues.
- In *dialogue*, our goal is to identify, express, and work with as much of the impact of our exchange as we can in the moment and to bring the other after-effects of our dialogue back to the dialogue process.
- In *dialogue*, emotional responses are honored and highlighted as important information that can be used to deepen our understanding of personal issues, group dynamics, our content, and the implications of our exchange.
- Dialogue* works to form active and immediate community among the specific individuals in the room.
- Dialogue* works to uncover specificity, contradictions, paradox, and a deeper understanding of and respect for one’s own personal reality and reality as it is experienced by others.
- Dialogue* may promote understanding and clarity but is often aimed at disruption, disequilibrium, confusion, and the destabilization of personal and collective realities.
- In *dialogue*, our mistakes, biases, and shortsightedness can sometimes be the most important thing we have to offer to the process of bringing about personal and social change.

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## Exploring the Differences Between Dialogue, Discussion, and Debate

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 other's preconceived notions
Acknowledge feelings, then discount them as inappropriate	Deny other's 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 other's experiences and feelings
Avoid areas of strong conflict and difference	<i>Focus on conflict and difference as advantage</i>	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/Trainers Southwest (1992)

**TO SUMMARIZE:**

The goal of **DIALOGUE** is to listen to and understand the other. I ask myself, “Am I coming to know and understand you better?”

The goal of **DEBATE** is to defeat the other’s position. I ask myself, “Am I winning this argument?”

The goal of **DISCUSSION** is persuade others, usually while avoiding conflict. I ask myself, “Is the other person agreeing with me and liking me?”

**SOME QUESTIONS TO ASK MYSELF IF I AM HAVING TROUBLE STAYING WITH DIALOGUE:**

Am I honoring my own experience as valid...

*OR, am I feeling defensive about it?*

Can I trust others to respect differences...

*OR, do I suspect others are trying to force me to change?*

Can I trust myself to be permeable and still maintain integrity...

*OR, do I fear that really hearing a different perspective will weaken my position?*

Am I willing to open myself to the pain of others (and my own pain)...

*OR, am I resisting pain that I really do have the strength to face?*

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