



## **Effective Instructional Practice: Facilitating Dialogue**

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Research concerning dialogic communication has a rich history that spans multiple disciplines such as communication studies, literary criticism, education, sociology, and philosophy. Typically, scholars have approached dialogue in one of two ways. In the first approach, scholars view dialogue as a fleeting, ephemeral moment of heightened awareness of the Other, encouraging a perspective taking so powerful that a person truly understands oneself as another (Bakhtin, 1981; Buber, 1958; Ricouer, 1992). For these scholars, dialogue is not something that can be planned; rather, participants can only create the conditions for dialogue. Dialogue is, therefore, realized spontaneously, and transforms oppressive social relationships through rehumanization. In the second approach, scholars define dialogue as an intentional communicative act--one that is accomplished to perceive and act upon oppressive social systems (Freire, 2000; Habermas, 1990). For these scholars, dialogue is a process of posing hegemonic, oppressive features of social reality (e.g., classism, genderism, racism) as problems that are jointly demystified and transformed by co-participants. Together, both approaches conceptualize dialogue as over or above normal, quotidian communication and a catalyst for social justice; yet, their emphasis on the function, nature, and intentionality of dialogue often differs.

Critical communication pedagogy scholars have embraced both approaches to dialogue, arguing that each approach provides instructors and students the conceptual tools necessary for humanizing *praxis* (i.e., reflective action to transform oppression).

As Fassett and Warren (2007) stated, dialogue is best understood as “both metaphor and method for our relationships with others” (p. 54). As metaphor, dialogue signals a communicative ideal whose realization functions to affirm co-participants’ intrinsic worth and breaks down hierarchical relationships. As method, dialogue is understood as a “process of sensitive and thorough inquiry . . . to [jointly] (de)construct ideologies, identities, and cultures” (Fassett & Warren, 2007, p. 55). Taken together, these definitions indicate that instructors and students should recognize dialogue as both an ethic and practice for social transformation (Rudick & Golsan, 2014).

Dialogue, it should be noted, is not the same as a pleasant, nice, civil, polite, or easy conversation. Although certainly those descriptions could characterize a dialogic exchange, it is just as likely that dialogue will be messy, emotional, frustrating, and difficult. Several feminist scholars (e.g., Ellsworth, 1989; Patton, 2004; Simpson, 2008) have established that participants who conflate dialogue with a pleasant conversation often squelch dissenting views and impose a form of oppressive civility. To realize the conditions necessary for dialogue, instructors and students must recognize, appreciate, and affirm the range of emotions and reactions one may have when dialoguing about oppression and privilege. Doing so ensures that participants do not retreat to a realm of abstract, hyperrationality in their interactions, but deeply and sensitively experience the hurt, triumphs, and beauty of their dialogic co-participants.

Although scholars have demarcated differences in how dialogue is practiced, there is universal agreement that students and instructors benefit through achieving it. Past studies have shown that students demonstrate heightened intercultural empathy, perspective taking, and openness through dialogic communication (DeTurk, 2001, 2006,

2011). Furthermore, extant scholarship indicates that students are more likely to understand the historical/social dimensions of social problems, recognize their cultural situatedness, and build alliances across differences when critical dialogue is a component of their educational experiences (Gurin, Nagda, & Lopez, 2004; Nagda & Gurin, 2007; Nagda & Zúñiga, 2003). Dialogue is a necessary condition of praxis because it ensures that instructors and students hold each other accountable to the ways that their intended social-justice activism can unwittingly support structures of domination (Allen, 2010; Kahl, 2011; Simpson, 2008).

An instructor who wishes to cultivate dialogue with students will often confront two barriers. First, some students from dominant identities may reject dialogue because it will necessitate the psychologically threatening idea that they have benefitted from systemic marginalization (Allen, 2010). Some of these students may criticize or attack the instructor in an effort to reject being a part of a dialogic exchange, especially if the instructor identifies with marginalized communities (Patton, 2004). Second, instructors may not be ready for the loss of control that may characterize dialogue (Ellsworth, 1989). Indeed, some students may even place their instructor's beliefs, identities, or advocacy as topics of analysis. Instructors who view the world as open for critique (as long as they are excluded from that analysis) may find dialogue a frightening endeavor. Despite these barriers, there are ways that instructors can promote dialogic contact in the classroom.

### **Three Tips on Facilitating Dialogue in the Classroom**

1. Introduce the topic and boundaries of the dialogue. Students who reject invitations to dialogue may do so by engaging in a variety of rhetorical ploys that

obfuscate the topic or their connection to it (Hyttén & Warren, 2004). This tendency is especially true when students from dominant identities are invited to explore topics that challenge the sense of normalcy, rightness, or morality associated with their positionality. Therefore, whether your goal is to realize a sense of rehumanization with students or problem pose about an oppressive system, you will need to identify the topic, the topics that are off-limits, and what speech will not be tolerated (e.g., personal attacks). Failing to do so can increase the chances that the conversation will shift from a dialogue to a debate.

2. Establish your identity in relation to the problem and ask students to do the same. Instructors who invite students into a dialogue are asking for a measure of transparency and trust that does not characterize most traditional forms of teaching. As such, instructors will often need to “take the first step” by modeling for students how to recognize their own identity in relation to the topic of dialogue. This ethic should move beyond merely self-labeling (e.g., I am a white, heterosexual, and middle-class male). Rather, instructors should strive for a more nuanced and rigorous form of reflexivity, where they “situate knowledge . . . in temporal, personal, and sociopolitical contexts” (Fassett & Warren, 2007, p. 50). Early in the semester, instructors may ask students practice this ethic in confidential class writings to provide a safer space for identity exploration.

3. Affirm experiential knowledge. When students speak from their lived experiences, it is important that instructors recognize their contribution. This ethic is especially crucial to adopt when individuals from marginalized communities speak about their experiences of oppression because they are taking a risk (e.g., facing social or

physical violence) by revealing information that is counter to the beliefs of people from dominant groups. Affirming experiential knowledge does not mean that co-participants are always correct or that their assertions should be naively taken at face value. Rather, it signals an openness to bracket one's immediate reaction (often shaped by hegemonic thinking) while sincerely and empathically listening to another person's perspective.

### **Assessing Dialogue in the Classroom**

Dialogue is not something that can be assessed directly because the effects of a dialogic encounter may not be immediate. However, instructors can assess students' shifts in beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors over time as a result of dialogue. One way to assess this shift is by asking students to complete confidential open-ended questions, reflective essays, or journals over the course of a semester (Kahl, 2011). Another method of assessment is to ask students to complete questionnaires regarding related concepts, such as their attributions to socio-historical causation, structural thinking, and perspective taking through pre/post-test design (Nagda, Gurin, & Lopez, 2003). Finally, students demonstrate the effectiveness of dialogue when they join, form, or contribute to organizations that address a social injustice that was discussed in class (Frey & Palmer, 2014).

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