

A COMPARISON OF DIALOGUE AND DEBATE

- 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.
- In dialogue, finding common ground is the goal.
In debate, winning is the goal.
- 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.
- Dialogue enlarges and possibly changes a participant's point of view.
Debate affirms a participant's own point of view.
- Dialogue reveals assumptions for reevaluation.
Debate defends assumptions as truth.
- Dialogue causes introspection on one's own position.
Debate causes critique of the other position.
- 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.
- 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.
- In dialogue, one submits one's best thinking, knowing that other peoples' reflections will help improve it rather than destroy it.
In debate, one submit's one's best thinking and defends it against challenge to show that it is right.
- Dialogue calls for temporarily suspending one's beliefs.
Debate calls for investing wholeheartedly in one's beliefs.
- In dialogue, one searches for basic agreements.
In debate, one searches for glaring differences.
- In dialogue, one searches for strengths in the other positions.
In debate, one searches for flaws and weaknesses in the other position.
- 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.
- 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.
- Dialogue remains open-ended.
Debate implies a conclusion.

Adapted from a paper prepared by Shelley 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.

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Key distinctions between debate and dialogue (after Roth et al. 1992)

Debate

1. Participants tend to represent a group with a specific opinion;
2. The atmosphere is threatening, attacks and interruptions are expected;
3. Differences within the group are set aside or denied; (or “research shows”)
4. Participants listen to refute other ideas, questions are often rhetorical challenges or disguised statements;
5. Statements are predictable and offer little new information;
6. Success requires simple impassionate statements;
7. It operates within the constraints of the dominant public discourse, which defines the problem and the options for resolution; it assumes that fundamental needs and values are already clearly understood.

Dialogue

1. Participants speak as individuals about their unique experiences and uncertainties;
2. The atmosphere is one of safety and promotes respectful exchange;
3. Differences between individual participants are revealed; (“some research shows x, some y”)
4. Participants listen to understand, and gain insight into the understandings of others;
5. New information surfaces;
6. Success requires exploration of the complexities of the issue being discussed;
7. Participants are encouraged to question the dominant public discourse, to express fundamental needs that may or may not be reflected in the discourse, and to explore various options for problem definition and resolution.

