



Public dialogue

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What is it?

Dialogue is commonly thought of as a special form of interpersonal communication between people who have a personal or close relationship. When the phrase "public dialogue" is used, it indicates that the context for dialogue has changed from the private to the public sphere and, in particular, to public decision-making or conflict-resolution contexts. Public dialogue occurs when citizens willingly engage with other citizens, listening to their views, no matter how divergent, and working collaboratively to generate understandings across difference and disagreement.

Who uses the concept?

The term public dialogue is used across a broad spectrum of fields, including communication, public policy, social work, education, social justice and activism, and organizational development. However, because the term is used within so many disciplines, there is no universal agreement on the defining features of public dialogue. In addition, outside of the communication discipline, there is often less attention to the specific communicative practices best suited for public dialogue. For practitioners, the need for public dialogue is most acute in adversarial, confrontational and combative situations, where it is hoped that changing the form of communication will improve the quality of public participatory practices. Public dialogue is also specifically called for in contexts where participatory democracy is being advocated. In such contexts, the term dialogue is often used with that of deliberation. However, the terms are not synonymous: at best, deliberation—the active weighing of advantages and disadvantages to make

action choices—can be thought of as a more specific practice than public dialogue.

Fit with intercultural dialogue?

In most instances, intercultural dialogue occurs in public contexts and, as such, is no more than a specific form of public dialogue, namely one that occurs among members of different cultures.

What work remains?

The integration of work on public dialogue by scholars in different disciplines is needed, especially where links can be established between dialogic practices, participatory democracy and social change. Specific attention could also be paid to practical-theoretical elaborations of particular key features of public dialogue practice, including, among others, qualities of listening and dialogic civility. In addition, there is need for a critical consideration of the possibilities for, and constraints in, the use of social media to further public dialogue.

Resources

Escobar, O. (2011). *Public dialogue and deliberation: A communication perspective for public engagement practitioners*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh Beltane - Beacons for Public Engagement.

Spano, S. (2001). *Public dialogue and participatory democracy: The Cupertino community project*. Creskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation
Resource Centre: www.ncdd.org/rc