



Dialogue

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What is it?

The term dialogue is central and also polysemic, that is, it has multiple possible meanings. Most often, whether in two-person, small group, or public contexts, dialogue labels a quality of communication characterized by the participants' willingness and ability simultaneously to be radically open to the other(s) and to articulate their own views. One's contributions to the communicating are both assertive and open to the other's active shaping. Dialogue occurs when the participants let the other person(s) happen to them while holding their own ground. Dialogue's primary goal is understanding rather than agreement, an outcome that can result from sustained collaborative inquiry. Participants are expected to practice humility, empathy, and curiosity about differences and to accept the possibility of non-closure. The primary benefit of dialogue is that, when this quality is present, the communicating is highly likely to continue.

Who uses the concept?

The term dialogue is used by diplomats, anthropologists, organizational development trainers, social activists, public policy workers, and communication professionals, often with an adjective to describe the variety. Some contrast dialogue with debate and discussion as an alternative approach to problem-solving or dispute resolution. Occasionally, the term is hijacked to provide a patina of respectability to overtly political efforts focused on control or persuasion.

Fit with intercultural dialogue?

Intercultural dialogue occurs whenever culturally-different individuals or groups communicate in ways that manifest their differences and embody the both-and quality described earlier. Given the natural complexity and context-dependence of cultural identities, almost any instance of human interaction might be viewed as an "intercultural" one, open to the possibility that it could become an instance of intercultural dialogue.

What work remains?

It would be ill-advised to try to create a universally-applicable definition of a term with this one's historical freight. Dialogue scholars and practitioners would benefit from research that identifies the verbal and nonverbal practices that enhance and detract from the quality of contact described. Those committed to dialogue might also attempt to preserve the term as a label for a particular type, kind, or quality of communication, rather than one that can be used to describe any human exchange.

Resources

- Bohm, D. (1996). *On dialogue*. New York: Routledge.
- Herzig, M., & Chasin, L. (2006). *Fostering dialogue across divides: A nuts and bolts guide from the public conversations project*. Watertown, MA: Public Conversations Project. Available from: <http://bit.ly/1fMmWXN>
- Stewart, J. (2013). *U&ME: Communicating in moments that matter*. Chagrin Falls, OH: Taos Institute Publications.