

# FACILITATING DIALOGUE IN THE CLASSROOM



Dialogue involves two-way conversations where people not only speak to each other but also really *listen*. In dialogue, we are passionately committed to understanding the other person. We understand that no one has *the right answer*, because no one can see the problem from all sides. The focus moves from debating who is right to exploring different perspectives and complex relationships.

Dialogue occurs in a space—a physical space where people come together, but also a set of non-physical conditions where everyone feels safe to interact openly. This whole space can be referred to as the *container* or *situation* for dialogue. Facilitating dialogue is the art of creating this container in which people become aware of their assumptions and suspend judgements. They listen to each other and remain open to the possibilities inherent in others' views.



## THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER/FACILITATOR

Facilitation should focus on process, not content. As a facilitator of dialogue in a classroom, the teacher sets an atmosphere that encourages reflection and involvement. The teacher is not an observer but a participant in the conversation; ready to depart into the unknown, seek meaning, and probe. The teacher remains neutral, trustworthy and a good listener, and allows the *community of inquiry* to direct the discussion. In such inquiry, everyone is a member of the dialogue.

In a classroom community of inquiry, the teacher and the students often sit together in a circle or in small groups to dialogue. The teacher may use a stimulus (e.g., a storybook, video clip, newspaper article) to engage the students in an open discussion in which the students formulate questions and explore ideas together. There is no pressure to come to convergence of opinion.

In facilitating inquiry and collective meaning-making, the key ingredients are:

- let go of the “banking” reflex whereby teachers provide the approved truth
- explore one’s own assumptions, biases and beliefs, and suspend judgement
- listen for connections between ideas and honour everyone’s contributions
- cultivate multiple dimensions of a question and encourage diverse perspectives

The facilitator also needs to model the spirit of dialogue. This includes self-reflection, openness, curiosity and critical/creative thinking. This may be difficult at first but can be refined and developed through practice.



## NURTURING DIALOGUE

Although there are no “rules” for dialogue, there are certain orientations that promote dialogue and make interactions more helpful.

To nurture a **safe and inclusive space** where students feel they can speak openly together and ask questions without fear, the teacher can:

- invite students to reflect on their assumptions and recognize how their assumptions shape their thinking and ways of seeing others and the world
- encourage students to suspend judgements when engaging in conversation with others
- encourage everyone to participate and make sure everyone’s voice is heard and respected

The focus of dialogue is on **questions, not answers**. As a facilitator, the teacher is not the expert providing the “right answers” but a catalyst for helping students ask “good questions.” Here are some ideas:

- encourage students to ask questions and exchange stories, perspectives and values (this creates a space for openness and wonder)
- pose open questions that encourage deep thinking and are relevant to students’ lives
- be attentive to students’ questions and allow those to direct the pedagogical agenda

**Putting power in its place** allows all voices to be heard and no one voice to dominate or be seen as the authority. This means the teacher is not the source of all knowledge, and more verbal students are not allowed to control the conversation. Everyone is a partner in the egalitarian dialogue. To put different sources of power in their place, use strategies such as the following:

- encourage students to really listen to each other and think and reflect before they speak
- invite students to question and assess the evidence for what they hear from any source
- create ways in which all students (especially those less likely to contribute verbally) feel safe to take chances, step out of their comfort zone, and contribute their point of view

**Practicing empathy** – the attempt to imagine and step into someone else’s shoes, to try to think their thoughts and feel their feelings – is essential to dialogue. Nurturing empathy *within oneself* involves recognizing the limitations of our own self-awareness as well as our limited capacity to understand the entirety of another’s experience. To nurture empathy *within the classroom*, we need to get the students to think and feel things from the perspective of others. Here are a few strategies:

- model empathy in the classroom and throughout the school
- use teachable moments to reflect on how a student or a character in a story or a picture might be feeling during a certain situation
- emphasize shared values and common interests while recognizing differences among students
- create opportunities for collaboration through group projects or teams during games to allow students to work together and forge bonds

## Responding to unproductive communication dynamics

is important in maintaining the spirit of dialogue. When challenged by a new perspective, people can easily feel uncomfortable. Students might respond to each other with disrespectful or judgemental behaviour, or engage in argument. When noticing such behaviours, use strategies such as the following:

- remind the class that the goal is to encounter differences with openness and to build trust and understanding
- ask questions that transform the conversation into an inquiry and promote curiosity rather than judgement

Teachers can use creative methods to **capture key ideas** throughout the conversation and highlight them for further reflection and analysis. Here are some suggestions:

- write key ideas or questions on the white board or post-it notes
- use a roll of paper to capture collaborative contributions to a theme
- have students engage in written or art-based projects
- invite students to reflect and evaluate how they did as a group, and record their thoughts or any lingering questions