



HELPFUL DEFINITIONS

Discourse is the practice of listening and speaking on a topic of shared interest or concern with intention to promote understanding, knowledge-building, and community engagement.

Debate is a competitive, two-way conversation. The goal is to win an argument or convince someone, such as the other participant or third-party observers.

Dialogue is a cooperative, two-way conversation. The goal is for participants to exchange information and build relationships with one another.

(Schmidt and Pickney, 2023)

What is Discourse?

To learn, grow, and deepen our understanding of self, others, and matters of ultimate concern, discourse is necessary. This guide offers foundational information on what discourse is, and how we begin building an effective structure for engagement.

UNDERSTANDING THE SPECTRUM OF DISCOURSE: DIALOGUE, DISCUSSION & DEBATE

	Dialogue	Discussion	Debate
Purpose	Builds understanding of the topic; explores the topic from multiples angles; engages in active listening; considering multiple viewpoints.	Focus is on the exchanging of ideas; participant may enter with a perspective but are open to hearing new information to shape their opinion on a topic.	Focus is advancing a particular position and refuting counter arguments; requires advanced preparation.
Participant Role	Openly explores the topic, including diverse research sources, active listening, rephrasing, asking questions, and practicing empathy.	Share what they are thinking, including research and reactions as to why one position may be the strongest.	Requires advanced preparation usually on a particular outcome or position; actively responding to and refuting counter arguments; identifying holes in their logic, reasoning, or evidence of opposing positions.
Facilitator/Educator Role	Model and teach active listening skills, empathy building, finding common ground, and considers multiples angles to a topic.	Encourages participation from all participants, models and teaches source analysis and reasoning skills, and prompts students to summarize each other's points and ask clarifying questions.	Crafts or guides students to craft formal motion for debate, explicitly teaching argument skills, often serves as the judge of who had the strongest argument based on neutral criteria such as sound logic and evidence.
Things to Consider	Dialogue is the best suited for students/participants who are still learning about all the angles and nuance is involved or for topics where emotions run high, so that there is a focus on the goal of understanding rather than identifying winning arguments and losing arguments.	Discussion is best suited for conversations around policy topics where students/participants have some background knowledge and opinions but also want to learn more and consider different ways to approach the topic.	Debate is best suited for explicitly teaching persuasion skills and is the best for the topic where emotions do not run high and when students are assigned the sides randomly or take both positions rather than only sticking with their existing positions.

BUILDING FOUNDATIONS FOR DISCOURSE

Words Matter

Before engaging in the discourse process, it is important to first consider the language we use when inviting people into the process—it sets the tone. For example, using “verses and or” and “controversial and contentious” (Schmidt and Pickney, 2022).

“Verses suggest opposition, being against or in contrast to a point of view, while or suggest alternatives—alternative perspectives, ways of thinking and being. The term controversial is often associated with a connotation that is negative, intense, or subject to extreme disapproval. The term contentious is associated with disagreement. We do not want participants to see discourse topics as negative, but rather as ideas that need more exploring” (Schmidt and Pickney, 2022).

DEVELOPING COMMUNITY GUIDELINES

Community guidelines—also known as aspirations, norms, ground rules—give each group member a framework for respecting and understanding each other’s opinions and lived experiences. Guidelines can help facilitators and group members navigate conflict when it emerges. Establishing community guidelines is an essential part of creating a brave, inclusive space.

While we believe it is preferable to invite the group to create their own guidelines, in the interest of time facilitators may present a pre-determined list and review it with the group for modifications. Community guidelines should be viewed as a “living document,” open to modification as needed (Developing Community Guidelines, 2023).

1. **Developing Community Guidelines**
2. **An Invitation to Brave Space**

DEVELOPING THE GUIDE STRUCTURE

1. Guiding Question:

An overarching question that provides a focus of the discourse. It should be open-ended with no definitive right or wrong answer but requires strong reasoning and evidence in the answer.

2. Uninterrupted Thinking Time:

Participants should be given individual time to think about the guiding questions. (3-5 minutes, more if needed)

3. Information Provided:

Provide unbiased concise information: Charts, infographics, short summaries, video clips, etc.

4. Dedicated Q&A Time:

Give time for people to ask clarifying questions.

5. Exit Opportunity:

Participants need to know what if a topic or question is too much, they can opt out all together.

(Schmidt and Pickney, 2023)

*Additional reflections when preparing for discourse:
Building My Voice: Project on Civil Discourse*

CITATIONS

An invitation to a brave space - grossmont college. (n.d.). https://www.grossmont.edu/faculty-staff/participatory-governance/student-success-and-equity/_resources/assets/pdf/brave-space-poem.pdf. University of Michigan. The Program on Intergroup Relations. Retrieved January 26, 2024, from <https://igr.umich.edu>

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