



Participation Strategies

Dialogue operates in a co-learning paradigm. Facilitators and participants each have roles and responsibilities in realizing the potential of a dialogue experience. Unlike some traditional learning modalities, dialogue requires that participants actively engage and take responsibility for their learning and the learning of others.

The following list of participation strategies are not exhaustive, rather they are presented as an introductory resource to aid in planning and reflection.

Strategies for maximizing learning

- *Establish personal learning goals*
- *Witness the learning of others*
- *Connect your experiences*
- *Participate with vulnerability, take risks*
- *Minimize distractions*

Strategies for encouraging others

- *Active listening*
- *Verbal affirmations*
- *Non-verbal affirmations*
- *Connected speaking*
- *Posing Questions*

Strategies for stepping forward

- *Draft comments and questions*
- *Vocalize resonance or dissonance*
- *Affirm your value*
- *Take responsibility*
- *Make the most of small group interactions*

Strategies for stepping back

- *Take notes*
- *Budget contributions*
- *Lean into silence*
- *Observe group dynamics, power, and privilege*
- *Trust others*

Strategies for managing emotions

- *Name your feelings for yourself*
- *Name your behavioral impulses for yourself*
- *Regulate your breathing*
- *Take perspective*
- *Share your feelings with the group*



Maximizing Learning: Dialogue is not a passive activity, it requires full participation. With focus and intentionality, dialogue can be transformative.

- ***Establish personal learning goals***
 - The complexity of dialogue lends to a diverse array of potential outcomes. Dialogue experiences are rarely designed around a single learning outcome. When participants set their own goals to expand their knowledge, skills, and values, they are well positioned to maximize dialogic learning.
- ***Witness the learning of others***
 - At times, the personal relevance of the content of the dialogue may not be clear. In these moments, paying attention to the learning processes of others—the questions they ask and the connections they make—may reveal new ways we can learn and grow.
- ***Connect your experiences***
 - Making meaningful connections between the content of the dialogue with our life experiences is foremost the responsibility of each participant—not the responsibility of the facilitator. When we recall and integrate our lived experiences, the dialogue experience becomes richer and more engaging.
- ***Participate with vulnerability, take risks***
 - It is common for participants to remain silent or heavily edit their contributions because exploring complex social and political issues with diverse peers increases the risk that we may misunderstand or be misunderstood. Ironically, the full potential of dialogic learning is realized in the exploration of such misunderstandings. Maximizing dialogic learning requires that each participant lean into the vulnerability of sharing their own thoughts, feelings, and experiences with a willingness to explore the impact of their contributions on others.
- ***Minimize distractions***
 - Dialogic learning requires a unique level of focus. While many of us can successfully and respectfully multitask in other educational and professional settings, the dialogue process necessitates that we minimize our distractions. We set ourselves up for success when we turn off our cell phones, silence our smart watches, and put away our computers.



Encouraging Others: Full participation in dialogue includes supporting the participation of others. Dialogue is a learning community in which all participants are responsible to one another.

- **Active listening**
 - When we feel seen and heard, we are likely to share more and share more vulnerably. We can encourage the participation of our peers, and deepen the dialogue, by demonstrating that we are actively listening. This includes maintaining an engaged body posture, and limiting distractions.
- **Verbal affirmations**
 - Affirmation is a practice of honoring another person's worth and humanity, it is not a practice of agreement or identification. We can affirm people we disagree with by appreciating their contribution, their vulnerability, or their role in our own learning. Verbal affirmations often take the form of gratitude.
- **Non-verbal affirmations**
 - Affirmation is a practice of honoring another person's worth and humanity, it is not a practice of agreement or identification. We can affirm people we disagree with by appreciating their contribution, their vulnerability, or their role in our own learning and reflection. Non-verbal affirmations may look like nodding, smiling, caring eye contact, or signaling curiosity or intrigue.
- **Connected speaking**
 - A distinction between dialogue and discussion is the connection between participant contributions. In discussion, participants may offer ideas or experiences that are not connected to any previous contributions. Discussion is often random and individualized. In dialogue, we encourage depth by connecting our thoughts, feelings, and experiences to those who have spoken before us.
- **Posing Questions**
 - In traditional learning spaces, questions tend to be centered on the facilitator. Either the facilitator is posing questions to the participants—or participants are asking questions of the facilitator. In dialogic learning, we achieve our full potential when participants pose questions to one another.



Stepping Forward: For some, participation in dialogue can be unfamiliar, uncomfortable, or stressful. The success of any dialogue requires all participants to lean into full participation.

- ***Draft comments and questions***
 - One way to mitigate the ambivalence or anxiety of sharing thoughts, feelings, and experiences in the large group is to take notes and draft possible comments or questions to share in small or large group reflections.
- ***Vocalize resonance or dissonance***
 - If you are not ready to initiate a conversation or share with specificity your own thoughts, feelings, and experiences—a place to begin is to communicate your resonance or dissonance with the contributions of fellow participants.
- ***Affirm your value***
 - We may fall silent in moments where we feel we have nothing to contribute or hold beliefs that others participants contributions are worthier than our own. In these moments, positive self-talk can mitigate self-doubt. All of us are in a position to add value.
- ***Take responsibility***
 - In dialogue, we have a responsibility to the learning community. Withdrawal from dialogue not only impacts our own learning, it impacts the learning of others. When we share our own thoughts, feelings, and experiences we ensure dialogic learning is reciprocal.
- ***Make the most of small group interactions***
 - Often, dialogue facilitators will create opportunities for participants to reflect individually, in pairs, or in small groups. These spaces are useful for clarifying and refining thinking in a lower risk environment. Practicing our contributions in small groups may enable our participation with the large group.



Stepping Back: For some, participation in dialogue can be familiar, comfortable, even exhilarating. This may result in eager and enthusiastic participation. Without mindfulness and self-regulation, a zealous participant can limit the full participation of others.

- **Take notes**
 - Note taking may mitigate a sense of urgency to share numerous thoughts and feelings with the group. Note taking provides an outlet for emergent thoughts, feelings, and experiences and also serves to clarify and refine contributions before sharing with the group.
- **Budget contributions**
 - For participants who struggle with compulsive sharing, implementing an artificial budget or set of rules on their sharing may provide a useful structure to balance their participation. For example, setting the max number of contributions you plan to make during a given activity and keeping a tally in your notes. Or, waiting to contribute only after five other peers have contributed.
- **Lean into silence**
 - Participants may equate silence with the absence of dialogue, and feel compelled to “resolve” the silence by contributing to the group. Contrary to this assumption, silence is an essential dimension of dialogue. Silence is a space in which feelings are communicated, meaning is made, and the group process shifts. Leaning into silence, and the discomfort it may evoke, is a meaningful contribution.
- **Observe group dynamics, power, and privilege**
 - Some participants may experience discomfort, frustration, or boredom when not verbally contributing to the dialogue. To mitigate these feelings, participants can take on other roles as observers of the group process. Much can be learned by noticing group dynamics—who is participating and how? Who is not participating and why? In these observations dynamics of power and privilege may reveal themselves.
- **Trust others**
 - A compulsion to verbally contribute may be connected to an implicit belief that the group cannot realize a concept, deliberate an issue, or discover a nuance without our participation. We can practice necessary humility by maintaining belief that fellow group members are capable of generating similar ideas in potentially novel ways.



Managing Emotions: Dialogue welcomes and centers emotion as an essential function of transformative learning. When balanced, our emotions can facilitate connection, insight, and empathy. When out of balance, emotions can exacerbate discord, inhibit learning, and demotivate full participation.

- ***Name your feelings for yourself***
 - Examining and naming our feelings for oneself is a useful step to productively managing them. Naming an emotion does not necessarily require verbalization. Naming the feeling in our head or writing it down in our notes can be a useful tool to understand where our feelings come from and what we can do with them.
- ***Name your behavioral impulses for yourself***
 - Our emotional reactions often elicit behavioral responses. We may feel compelled to submit, defend, aggressive, or retreat in a number of ways. Recognizing behavioral impulses in yourself is useful to understanding your emotions and managing your behavior so you can maintain productive engagement.
- ***Regulate your breathing***
 - When our emotions are aroused, our bodily responses shift and such shifts may exacerbate the discomfort we feel. One bodily response we can influence is our breathing. When aroused, we may hold our breath or breathe more quickly. One breathing exercise, 4-7-8 breathing, is one effective and discrete breathing regulation activity. 4-7-8 breathing includes (1) inhaling through your nose for 4 counts to fill your lungs, (2) then holding your breath for 7 counts, then (3) exhaling out your mouth for 8 counts to empty your lungs—Repeat as needed.
- ***Take perspective***
 - If we are experiencing uncomfortable emotions in response to the contributions of another dialogue participant, it becomes more difficult to empathize with the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of others. In these moments, perspective taking requires more intentionality. Posing questions to oneself like “where might their thoughts be coming from” and “where might their feelings be coming from?”—and answering these questions with generosity—can help us step outside of our feelings and better manage them.
- ***Share your feelings with the group***
 - Because emotional engagement is a distinguishing feature of dialogic learning, sharing our emotions with the group is often appropriate and useful for the goals of the dialogue. After we have taken time to understand and name our feelings, sharing our emotional experience with fellow participants can help manage our feelings and deepen the dialogue.