



MAGNA ONLINE SEMINARS

A Discussion Guide for Facilitators

Donna Qualters, Ph.D.

Donna Qualters is the director of the Center for Teaching Excellence and an associate professor of education and human services at Suffolk University in Boston.



MAGNA

ARE YOU SKEPTICAL ABOUT THE BENEFITS OF ‘ONE-OFF’ PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT EVENTS?

I have to admit that I am skeptical about quick, onetime events too. Even when the presenter is good, the topic is good, the timing is good . . . sometimes our colleagues walk away from an event *unchanged*. Despite our best intentions, the very next day they are still doing the same things the same old way. It’s almost as if nothing had happened.

Why?

Here’s one possible explanation: if they don’t see the need to make a change, they won’t consider doing anything differently. And they may not see the need to change if they don’t have a chance to process the information, test it out, and assess its effectiveness.

I’m convinced that the problem with many one-off events is not with the presenter, the topic, or the timing. The problem is that the content in the event is not developed or supported by a process that gives the audience a chance to think and talk about the content, try applying it, and look at the results later.

Why is this multistep process so important?

Social theory tells us that change in individuals occurs in stages. A well-known model by Prochaska et al. (1992) says that there are six stages of change:

- Pre-contemplative
- Contemplative
- Preparation
- Action
- Maintenance
- Possible relapse

People who are in the pre-contemplative stage (and, in all honesty, that is most of us most of the time) often do not respond to well-intentioned information given in professional development events. The pre-contemplatives aren’t ready yet.

The challenge is to get them to the next stage, where they will contemplate taking action.

How do you do that? I’d like you to consider trying an innovative technique called “dialogue.” Studies on using dialogue in an educational setting report encouraging results (Qualters, 2009, 2002, 1998). Dialogue sessions that were run with faculty members showed that real change in thinking and action takes place after the dialogue. Dialogues help faculty move through the stages of change.

WHAT IS DIALOGUE?

Think of dialogue as being more than just a conversation – it can be part of a process whereby ideas and strategies are explored deeply. Here is a definition worth considering: Dialogue is:

...the creative space in which entirely new ways of thinking and acting may emerge. Dialogue is a space of deep thinking, where there is nothing to prove, where well-worn ways of thinking and being can be let go of. In a dialogue, there is nothing to be solved and nothing to be defended.

(Isaacs, W. (1992). Dialogue project summary. Cambridge, MA: Report from the Center for Organizational Learning, Massachusetts Institute of Technology., p.1)

A successful dialogue is a carefully constructed and monitored process whereby people with a common interest are brought together and establish a common language to probe their own assumptions and the assumptions of others in a nonthreatening, nonjudgmental environment and examine the reasons that led to the assumptions.

A successful dialogue can help you realize that your assumptions are worth reconsidering. Sometimes, this results in an “aha” moment that motivates you to make a change.

How does a dialogue differ from a debate? Debate is about taking a position and defending it against all comers. The goal in a debate is to convince people that your arguments are stronger. Dialogue, on the other hand, is about working together in a community of like-minded practitioners to understand our own belief systems that influence our work. The goal in a dialogue is to get to the bottom of an issue and then decide what to do about it.

Let me give you an example. We all think we know what the word “teaching” means. If you were having a dialogue around the word teaching, you might discover that to one person, it’s the transfer of knowledge. To another, it’s facilitating learning; to another it is providing skills and tools to obtain knowledge. You might discover that it’s difficult to discuss “our teaching” when your group does not share the same meaning for the term.

You would first explore why people have these different definitions of teaching, then talk about where they came from and if they are true today. Next you might come up with a collective definition or metaphor for teaching, or you might realize that there is validity to multiple definitions and acknowledge the need for different strategies for different individuals. You would then work together to help each other develop those strategies.

The goal for our dialogue is not to decide which one way of thinking is the only right way. Rather, it is to build a common experience base that will allow everyone to learn together.

You will know that your dialogue is successful when the participants have been able to explore other’s perspectives in a nonthreatening, communal setting and then collectively take the next step of deciding what to do.

You might have heard the term “triple-loop learning.” If single-loop learning is learning how to do something and “double-loop” learning is understanding why you should do something, “triple-loop” learning is being transformed by what you have learned. To be “transformed by what you have learned” means that you have changed your assumptions and the way you think about something, which leads to changing how you act. That’s a tall order – but it’s what we’re after.

HOW DO YOU FACILITATE A DIALOGUE?

Let's start with the big picture. In a dialogue, you will explore four questions:

- What do you believe?
- Why do you believe it?
- Is it true?
- What action should you take?

The questions that you ask will not be the typical discussion questions. Rather, the task is to probe and test beliefs. The key is to create an atmosphere where you can think, process, and identify assumptions.

Perhaps the best way to describe a facilitation is to give an example.

Let's say that you are going to facilitate a dialogue for a presentation titled "Learner-Centered Teaching: Where Do I Start?" given by my friend Maryellen Weimer. Here is how you would proceed:

Step 1: Bring copies of "Guidelines for Dialogue" (see page 7) with you to the event to distribute to all participants.

Step 2: While you are listening to the presentation with your colleagues, make a list of the assumptions that the presenter makes. In this particular example, your list will look something like this:

- Having students participate in their learning is better teaching than just giving them the facts about a topic.
- Students today may need more guidance, and many are often more dependent on the teacher and need techniques to help them become more self-directed.
- Having students summarize the learning at the end of class is valuable because it increases their learning and makes them more responsible.
- Students have responsibility for their learning, but teachers have a responsibility to help them understand this by using learner-centered techniques.

Step 3: After the event is over, go over the "Guidelines for Dialogue" (which you have already distributed to the participants) with the group.

Step 4: Begin the discussion with an open-ended question and an invitation to work individually:

"Maryellen has described 'Learner-Centered Teaching' as allowing students to participate in and take responsibility for their teaching. Take a minute and write down for yourself the pros and cons of a learner-centered teaching approach."

Step 5: After a few minutes, ask the participants to discuss their ideas with one other person.

"Now, turn to a partner and share what you've written and discuss why you wrote that."

Step 6: Ask the pairs to address the whole group.

“Who would like to share the discussion you’ve had as a pair about the pros and cons?”

This will begin the dialogue. Be sure as a facilitator to again remind them that their job is to listen and talk about the ideas and beliefs being raised.

Step 7: Begin to probe assumptions by asking if a specific assumption is true for them.

*“Here is an assumption that Maryellen uses in advocating for learner-centered teaching . . . let’s start here.” [Say the assumption, then wait a moment or two.]
“Who would like to share your thoughts?”*

Be sure to probe why participants accept or challenge Maryellen’s assumptions.

Step 8: If the assumptions seem to be true, ask participants for suggestions for methods or techniques they use to foster learner-centered teaching. Don’t shy away from discussing concrete ideas.

Step 9: If polarization occurs, allow it. Pause and revisit it.

Step 10: Summarize the assumptions that they reach consensus on and the strategies that follow from them.

WHAT DO YOU DO AFTER THE DIALOGUE IS OVER?

You can help your colleagues move from the “contemplative” stage to the “action” stage by doing the following after the event is over:

- A week or two after the session, email the participants and ask them if they’ve tried anything. Find out how it is going.
- Send a “suggestion of the day” (based on the suggestions from the workshop) to the participants.
- At the end of the semester, send a survey. Following is a sample survey.

SAMPLE SURVEY

Thank you for participating in our dialogue on “Learner-Centered Teaching: Where Do I Start?”

Please rate your response to the following questions, using this scale:

1 = strongly disagree 2 = disagree 3 = neutral 4 = agree 5 = strongly agree

Prior to attending the dialogue:

1. I was comfortable with my teaching practice and did not think of changing it.
1 2 3 4 5
2. I thought about trying new ideas/methods/techniques, but it seemed too time-consuming.
1 2 3 4 5
3. I thought about trying new ideas/methods/techniques, but I was unsure about how to implement them. 1 2 3 4 5
4. I thought about trying new ideas/methods/techniques, but I was uncertain about how my students would react. 1 2 3 4 5

After attending the dialogue:

5. I became more aware of the issues in teaching, which I had not thought about previously.
1 2 3 4 5
6. I learned new ideas/methods/techniques to implement. 1 2 3 4 5
7. I learned new ideas that I’m considering implementing in my class and will talk to someone further. 1 2 3 4 5
8. I tried new ideas/methods/techniques. 1 2 3 4 5
9. I tried new ideas/methods/techniques but abandoned them because they did not work for my class. 1 2 3 4 5
10. I tried new ideas/methods/techniques but abandoned them even though they did work.
1 2 3 4 5
11. The dialogue allowed me to recognize my teaching beliefs/assumptions.
1 2 3 4 5
12. The dialogue allowed me to recognize other participants’ teaching beliefs/assumptions.
1 2 3 4 5
13. The facilitator supported the process of dialogue. 1 2 3 4 5
14. I would attend another dialogue session. 1 2 3 4 5
15. Additional comments:

GUIDELINES FOR PRODUCTIVE DIALOGUE

During this dialogue, we are going to identify the assumptions made during the presentation and then discuss whether we believe them to be true. We'll explore and question the basis for our beliefs.

There are benefits to doing this work as a group. Your colleagues' questions can deepen your thinking as you share your beliefs. As Deborah Meier noted, "Teaching is listening. Learning is talking."

Here are some guidelines for having a productive dialogue:

- 1. Generative listening:** Be aware of your own responses to the speaker. Does what someone else is saying make you glad? Frustrated? Nervous?
- 2. Suspension of assumptions:** Identify and note an assumption when a participant makes it.
- 3. Active listening:** Restate the speaker's statements before continuing the discussion. Say, "I am hearing you say _____. Is that correct?"
- 4. Observe the observer:** Watch the group for their reactions. You might say, "I can see that many of us are having strong reactions to that statement. Let's discuss it."
- 5. Slow down the inquiry:** Consider agreeing that after a statement is made, the group will silently let at least three seconds go by before anyone speaks.
- 6. Befriend polarization:** Consider saying, "It looks like we have two different viewpoints. Let's hold off on any further discussion for a while; we'll sit with these different views and revisit them later."
- 7. Spirit of inquiry:** You are there to inquire – not defend. Be open to what others say.
- 8. Respect:** This is the most important guideline. It encompasses all the other guidelines and the process itself.

DIALOGUE STRATEGIES

IF:	THEN:
<p>Someone is having a hard time seeing the value in having a dialogue.</p>	<p>During the session, the facilitator should identify the ideas that emerge during the dialogue. One way to record them is to use a method called “Concept Mapping.” (A sample concept map can be found on page 10.)</p> <p>After the meeting, send a summary (or a concept map) to all the participants. They will see the value in the process when they see the list of ideas and strategies that the session produced.</p> <p>Sometimes it makes sense to have a second meeting that focuses on implementing the first dialogue’s ideas.</p>
<p>No one wants to be the first one to identify an assumption.</p>	<p>Start by going through the guidelines. Make sure that the participants understand that they are not going to judge the ideas.</p> <p>Consider using the “think, pair, share” technique. Start by giving everyone a few minutes to think and jot down a few assumptions. Next pair up the participants and ask them to discuss their ideas. Then ask them to share the ideas with the group.</p> <p>Facilitators will need to be very active initially. For example, if a participant says, “This is too complicated,” the facilitator should say, “That’s an assumption. Let’s talk about it. Why do you believe this is true? Is it true for others here too?”</p> <p>Facilitators may need to identify the first few assumptions.</p> <p>Participation should flow more easily as you move along.</p>
<p>Two people disagree.</p>	<p>Make sure that the basic guidelines are being followed. It’s especially important that the participants wait three seconds before jumping in after someone speaks. It’s also important to paraphrase whatever was just said before proceeding.</p> <p>Sometimes it helps to have some time to reflect during a particularly heated disagreement. In that case, say, “We have two different belief systems here. I am going to note these ideas in a separate space on my whiteboard, and we’re going to reflect on this a bit and come back to it later.” Then proceed with a different topic.</p> <p>Later, when you bring people back to the topic, say, “Here are two different assumptions. Let’s talk once again about whether they are true for you.”</p> <p>Ultimately, it’s OK to agree to disagree on some points. Sometimes highly contentious issues cannot be resolved in a single dialogue.</p>

DIALOGUE STRATEGIES CONTINUED

IF:	THEN:
<p>Some of the participants are bent on “proving” that their perspectives are the only valid perspectives.</p>	<p>You may need to review the guidelines with the group. Make sure that the speakers are pausing and repeating.</p> <p>It is easier to have a debate than to have a dialogue. Most of your colleagues are much more familiar with the idea of debating (until one person “wins”) than they are with the idea of having a dialogue (where the real work of discovering the underlying assumptions happens). You may need to remind the participants of the purpose of the dialogue multiple times.</p> <p>However, they may also recognize that debates are often unproductive and futile. They may very well be willing to learn how to do things differently.</p> <p>These stock phrases may help:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “If you believe that’s true, then let’s talk about what makes that true.” • “OK, now I hear you saying____. What do others believe?” • “Remember, we’re here to identify your assumptions, find out why you believe them, and then find out if they’re true.” • Let’s share ideas about (topic X) that we have with each other and talk about it.”
<p>Someone does not want to speak.</p>	<p>Consider saying, “Would someone whom I haven’t heard from like to respond?”</p> <p>While it can be a much richer experience if everyone participates, it’s OK if some people decline, especially if their views were heard by the person they were paired with initially.</p> <p>No one should be put on the spot and forced to speak.</p>
<p>Someone would like some recommendations for further reading on dialogue or concept mapping.</p>	<p><i>Taking Flight: Dialogue, Collective Thinking, and Organizational Learning.</i> William Isaacs. http://cmapspublic.ihmc.us/rid%3D1255442475484_1908258935_21662/Dialogue,%20Collective%20Thinking,%20and%20Org%20Learning.pdf</p> <p><i>Dialogue: The Art of Thinking Together.</i> William Isaacs. Random House Publishers, 1999.</p> <p><i>The Theory Underlying Concept Maps and How to Construct and Use Them.</i> JD Novak, AJ Canas. http://scholar.google.com/scholar?hl=en&q=Concept+Mapping&btnG=Search&as_sdt=40000000&as_ylo=&as_vis=0</p>

A SAMPLE CONCEPT MAP

