**Student Resource**

**Dialogue Preparation: Dialogue, Debate, & Careful Listening**

Many times when people with differing opinions discuss topics they use debate. This often means each person is only interested in getting his or her point across and not in listening to the ideas of the other people in the conversation. Under this mode, little learning can or does happen. No one comes to understand each other. Rather, each tries to persuade the others, but because they are also more concerned with what they will say rather than really listening, there is not even much chance of persuasion.

There is another way. By engaging in dialogue and practicing good listening, everyone in a conversation can learn something from each other. Each can come to better understand the needs and ideas of others. And the group can develop a more informed and more satisfactory appreciation of the situation. If they are trying to make a decision, they will make a decision that meets more people’s needs (see table).

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|  **Debate Dialogue** |
| **Premise** | **There is one “right” or “best” answer or option** | **Listening together may increase mutual respect and reveal common ground** |
| **Style**  | **Combative- attempt to prove the other side wrong** | **Collaborative- attempt to find common understanding** |
| **Goal**  | **Prove my point or disprove yours** | **Determine what, if anything, we will do next** |
| **Listen**  | **To find flaws and search for weaknesses** | **To understand** |
| **Result** | **Win/Lose** | **Mutual understanding and respect may act, may continue exploring** |

Dialogue is rooted in respectful listening and thinking FIRST then respectful talking. In dialogue, the participants do NOT think about what they will say while they are listening. Rather they focus on what each other is saying and try to understand it. They ask follow-up questions to make sure they understand and to explore deeper rather than to point out flaws.

In some Native American traditions, they use the idea of a “talking stick,” which is some object that the person who is speaking holds. The talking stick reminds those not holding it to be listening carefully rather than either talking or thinking about what they will say. Good dialogue depends on “active listening.”

There are three levels of listening, which we all use from time to time:

**Background listening** occurs when there is sound or conversation and you are aware of it, but your awareness fluctuates… the sound comes in and out of your awareness.

**Passive listening** occurs when information is being directed at you, but your interest fluctuates—your attention goes in and out of focus and you only hear parts of the information or conversation.

**Active listening** occurs when you sincerely want to hear and understand what is being said; you keep your focus on what is being said and try to thoroughly understand. Some approaches or characteristics of active listening include:

• Pause and be silent before you respond, take a few seconds AFTER a person has stopped talking to think about what you will say.

• Ask follow up questions… are you sure you know what the person meant or are you making assumptions? Ask questions like: “Can you tell me more about that?” “Help me to better understand why you feel that way?” “I’m not sure I understand what you are trying to accomplish, can you explain it to me?”

• Confirm what you heard. For example, if you aren’t positive what the person was saying or meant, rephrase it and check if you have it correct: “I think I heard you say \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, did I get it right?”

• Recognize not just the words the person is saying but the emotion or feeling that might be going with it… you might even respond by showing your understanding of how something must feel: “Wow, that must be really scary” “I cannot imagine how difficult that must be” “Boy, that must make you feel really good” or, if you are unsure, consider asking “How did/does that make you feel?”

Active listening is VERY powerful. When you really actively listen to someone, it shows them respect. As you practice active listening in your every-day conversations, you may be amazed at how people respond to you. You will understand other people better and, as a side benefit, you may find they listen to you more too and come to trust and respect you more.

Source: Hass, L., Hamel, M., Sabo, A., & Tall, C. (2008). *Wisconsin climate change activity guide* (608.266.6790). Retrieved November 17, 2011, from www.dnr.wi.gov/eek/teacher/climatechangeguide.htm