

“Deliberating Together”

Van Hillard, Davidson College

In small-group discussions, we are often expected to converse with others in a cooperative rather than a conflictual way. Unlike debate, which results in declaring a victor, deliberation is an inquisitive and respectful form of conversation used to explore a question of interest to participants whose responses to that question may differ. As its name suggests, this form of conversation is more *deliberate* than discussion, as all members of the group aim to grasp one another’s positions in their fullness and detail, eager to locate differences and commonalities in how the group grapples with a question on the table. Deliberation takes time and a measure of intellectual energy, but there is no substitute for the collective intelligence it harnesses.

Deliberation depends on several sensibilities enacted during the conversation: (1) the involvement of all participants; (2) careful listening to others—and to ourselves; (3) requests for clarification, elucidation, and elaboration from others; and (4) the expectation that initial positions will evolve and become more nuanced, more qualified, or fully changed. Whereas debate contrasts the relative strength of two or more arguments, deliberation makes us aware of previously-unconsidered dimensions of issues, unanticipated responses to questions, and the strengths or limits of certain modes of thought—all of these enhancing the group’s understanding of something that matters to them.

Questions to Facilitate Reasoning Together

In order for a deliberation to succeed, participants typically make requests of one another. Several variations include:

clarification

- Would you mind saying that again?
- I sense that you are using X term in a special way. Can you say more about how you are using that term?
- I think that I hear you saying two things: X and Y. Is that correct?
- **In what context are you applying X?**
- **When you say X, this is what comes to mind for me. Is that a fair depiction?**
- Would it be appropriate to add X to your list of examples?
- Often, we think of X and Y as contrasting, but I sense that you find X and Y more similar than different. Is that right?
- Often, we think of X and Y as comparable, but I sense that you find X and Y more different than similar. Is that right?
- Several of us have been using the term X, but I am not sure that we all mean the same thing. Could we try to define X term so that we can agree on its use in our conversation?
- We’ve been using X term to refer to two kinds of situations. Would it help if we used X to refer to A situations, and Y to refer to situation B?
- It would help me to learn more details about X.
- Might we return for a moment to what got said earlier? It would help me to hear more about X.

reasons

- I appreciate knowing your position, but it would help me to learn how you arrived at it. Can you tell me what led you to believe X rather than Y?
- I have in mind yet another example of X, should we add it to your evidence, or set it aside?
- Do I understand you correctly to say that X causes Y?
- I think I now understand your claim, but for some reason I am missing the *because* explanation. Can you review that for me?
- Most people conclude X from observing Y, but I sense that you see things differently. Am I right?
- Can you say which of the reasons you've offered is the most necessary one?
- I am not sure I understood you correctly. Can we revisit the relationship between X and Y?
- I am unfamiliar with the tradition you're describing, but I'm intrigued. Does it proscribe X? Does it include Y? Does X typically precede Y? Can any elements be modified?
- I would like to learn more about your experience with X.

assumptions

- Is it safe to assume X in regard to what you've said?
- I appreciate your description of that sequence. Does X always follow, or are there variations?
- Do you find that many people have an experience similar to your own?
- Is that typically the consensus of the group you are speaking of?
- Have you found X to be the case in most situations?
- What initial impression do most people tend to have when they encounter X?
- What do you think we should do with exceptions to the rule?
- Can you identify a way of thinking that leads to misunderstanding or is generally unhelpful?
- Is X typically considered to be a good/bad thing?
- Do you think we should praise/condemn/ignore that behavior?

implications

- If, as you say, X leads to Y, then by that same logic, would A likely lead to B?
- I have heard you speak of X in Y fashion. Does that also mean that X possesses Z qualities?
- I heard you say that you experienced X feeling. Did you also experience Z feeling?
- If we agree to change X, should we also consider changing Y?
- From what you've said about X, I take it that you would think similarly about Y. Is that so?
- Now that you've identified that pattern, should we look for evidence of it elsewhere?

envisioning alternatives

- I admire your description, but might we envision another scenario?
- How might we account for someone who had a different experience with X?
- What if the data were different? Would we likely reach the same conclusion?
- Let's envision that this new piece of evidence was located. What adjustments would we make?
- Should we rely on whatever this expert has to say?
- As you've shown, the testimony of first-hand witnesses is often detailed, but might there be cases where it's less than accurate?
- It's been useful to learn that you see things X way, but what if someone saw things Y way?

framing disagreement

-

Questions to Facilitate Coherence

What follows is a list of “moves” typically associated with responding to and commenting on the substance of the deliberation as it unfolds. The moves have different purposes: some seek to clarify what’s getting said, others call a remark into question, and still others are designed to keep the conversation forward-moving and on track. Some focus on the content of the assertions themselves, while others are designed to clear the pathways of productive thinking. As said earlier, the focus here is not on the particular behaviors of individuals, but on how effectively the group is working together, making headway.

orientors

help to guide the group through the territory of the dispute

“I suggest that we begin with. . .”

“Might we change the subject for a moment to focus on . . .”

“I’d like us to return to something X said earlier. . .”

parts check

reminds the group of the elements that have been or could be under discussion

“We have identified X, Y, and Z as evidentiary components.”

“We have discussed X, but Y and Z remain unattended.”

“Are you saying, then, that X and Y are relevant, but Z is not?”

whole check

reminds the group what’s come so far from a complex discussion

“To confirm, are we still tracking X concern or responding to Y question?”

“Are there any loose ends to our conversation that might be connected to this larger aim?”

“Might we step back to formulate an overview of what we’ve said so far?”

not in Kansas anymore

re-confirms the overall purpose of the deliberation

“I’m lost; can someone get me back to home base?”

“I feel like the overall goal of our conversation is getting clouded over.”

“Might we stop for a moment to remind ourselves of why we’re here?”

“I sense that our original purpose has evolved to become X, am I right?”

priming the pump

helps the group re-energize, think outside the box, dig deeper

“Let’s take a time out to collect ourselves, to each of us focus intently on X.”

“If we acknowledge X, shouldn’t we also speak about Y?”

“How might the seed of this idea blossom? What should the group do to move X forward or to generate fresh perspectives?”

say more

asks an individual or the group to continue a line of thinking, identify additional evidence, extend commentary or critique

“I would like to hear more about X.”

“Could we locate additional evidence to support X?”
 “I wondered if your remarks were inadvertently cut short earlier.”

say less

invites an individual or the group to temporarily suspend their remarks either due to time constraints or in order to permit others in the group to offer their discourse

“Might we turn to others we’ve not yet heard from.”
 “No doubt, there’s much more to be said about X, but for the sake of completion, can we turn to other important work still left undone?”

entailments

inquires into the (often logical) consequences of remarks

“If you are saying X, would you go on to also say Y?”
 “I sense a pattern emerging here: if we find X, and also Y, will we find Z?”
 “If X is the case, then will Y follow?”

add a footnote

allows a member of the group to quickly add something to the conversation without derailing the flow of the discourse

“Let me add a footnote to that remark.”
 “Let’s not forget to attend to that element later.”

devil’s advocate

allows an individual to raise a concern or critique without contending with or refuting the entire argument

“Let me play devil’s advocate for a moment. What if X rather than Y was the case: would that change your sense of things?”
 “What if the scenario was X rather than Y? Would you say the same thing?”

piggybacking

allows an individual to build on or extend another’s comment while also acknowledging its source

“I would like to build on what X has said.”
 “Does it make sense to add this new element to X’s pattern of evidence?”

friendly amendment

allows an individual to correct what’s been said without full on challenging a line of thinking

“Before we move forward, I’d like to offer a slight correction here.”
 “I find myself in general agreement with what’s been said, but I suggest that we tweak (or revise) X.”

fresh language

an individual offers to paraphrase what’s been said or to suggest a cognate term for clarity

“Would it help if we put it this new way?”
 “So, am I right to say that, in other words, you are saying X?”

non-tendentious summary

an individual or the group attempts to represent an argument as fully, succinctly, and accurately as possible

“Essentially, then, the argument goes something like this: . . .”

“If we say X, have we represented this position fully and fairly?”

stipulated definition

an individual asks an interlocutor to clarify the particular way that a term is being defined

“When I typically encounter this term, I take it to mean X, but I sense that in you are using it somewhat differently. Can you offer the definition appropriate to this context?”

qualifiers

an individual asks if some remark should be qualified or delimited rather than left absolute

“To clarify, are you generalizing, or limiting your finding to certain cases?”

“Should we consider this an impression or a truism?”

inferences

an individual acknowledges hidden meanings and implications of what’s been said

“Is it safe, then, to assume that. . .?”

“Though we’ve not yet said it explicitly, I sense that we’re talking about Y.”

foundational assumptions

an individual asks an interlocutor to articulate (or to problematize) the connection between reason and evidence

“I see that you point your evidence to X conclusion, but might you draw alternative conclusions from the same evidence?”

“We have acknowledged the typical finding in a case like this, but are there reasonable and atypical findings that we should consider?”

a word about uncertainty

Charles Saunders Peirce, a nineteenth-century U.S. mathematician, logician, and pragmatist, urged that those weighing in on a contestable issue develop an attitude of what he called “contrite fallibilism,” a recognition that even the most adamant (or especially the most fervently-held) positions may require adjustment, revision, or full renovation in light of “good reasons,” that no human effort is flawless, omnipotent, or beyond potential evolving. As a generative condition of intellectual life, contrite fallibilism encourages us to approach one another with candor, eager for one another’s tempering that comes as robust deliberation proceeds.

At the end of a deliberation session, you might ask each participant:

Listening to others, what are you now less certain or less sure about?

Uncertainty is the ground from which fresh perspectives may emerge. Uncertainty catalyzes forward momentum and can spark evolution and change.