Advancing Engaged Learning through Dialogue Practice at CU-Boulder

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Student Need to Engage Across Difference

The 2014 Undergraduate Student Social Climate Survey underlined a strong need for student engagement across difference in classes and on campus. Within the context of the university's strategic imperatives of Inclusive Excellence and Shaping Tomorrow's Leaders, this paper outlines how classroom-based dialogic practice has begun to demonstrate ways to engage students creatively across difference. Facilitated classroom dialogues held by the CU Dialogues Program lead to desired engaged learning outcomes, including metacognition, the opportunity to hear across different perspectives, self-reflection, communication skills practice, and community building in the classroom. As the university reimagines its practices and structures, this is an open invitation to envision the role of dialogue as a universal practice more broadly.

What is Dialogue and the CU Dialogues Program?

A dialogue is a facilitated conversation that provides an opportunity for participants to share their experiences and speak from their own perspectives while also challenging participants to understand why they hold a perspective. A dialogue is an introspective and sharing process that allows differing viewpoints to be held side-by-side. The goal in a dialogue is for participants to gain a deeper understanding of their own and others' perspectives on a topic or issue. A dialogue does not aim to persuade or push a certain perspective but to help participants understand varying viewpoints. The facilitator helps promote introspection and critical thinking about the perspectives participants hold.

Housed under CU Engage: Center for Community-Based Learning and Research, within the School of Education, the CU Dialogues program serves as a resource for the campus at large. The Program organizes and facilitates conversations primarily in CU classes and other campus settings that enable students and other members of the CU community to explore issues pertinent to the subject matter of the class or to the community requesting the dialogue. The Program holds Classroom Dialogues in CU classrooms, which create experiential learning opportunities that reinforce course content and generate open discussion of difficult or controversial topics. Outreach Dialogues are held at other campus and off-campus settings and foster open sharing of experiences and perspectives among community members. The Program also offers a 3-credit undergraduate course, INVS 2989: "Dialogue Across Difference," which provides students the opportunity to learn what dialogue entails, practice dialogue, and be trained as dialogue facilitators.

The CU Dialogues Program often invites community participants to join facilitated classroom dialogues in order to expand the breadth of perspectives. To this end, the program has built partnerships with several campus and off-campus units including Housing Facilities Services, the Department of Student Athletics, US veteran groups, Frasier Meadows Retirement Community, Disability Services, and International Student and Scholar Services.
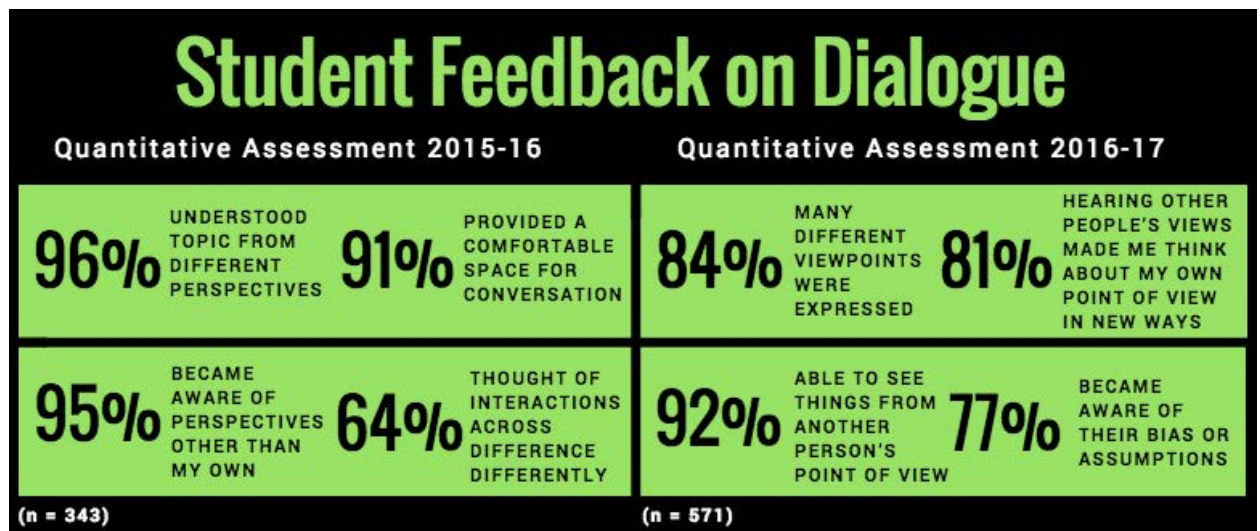
Dialogue As a Tool For Engaged Learning, Discovery and Stronger Campus Community

Student and faculty assessment of classroom dialogues indicates that dialogue is a powerful tool for engaged learning. Drawing on definitions of engaged learning presented in literature, the aspects of engaged learning that dialogue practice enacts include student-centered learning with real-world application (Taylor & Parsons 2011), the exploration of different perspectives (Park 2003) and self-awareness in service of a transformational educational experience (Bowen 2005).

Dialogue also provides a metacognitive experience, or a chance for students to gain "an individual knowledge of one's own learning processes" (Livingston, 1997), by asking students to share experiences/perspectives and reflect on what they and other students are sharing. Metacognition has been recognized as a critical educational process, as this white paper on metacognition demonstrates.

Finally, dialogue succeeds as an engaged learning process because it approaches students as whole people. By inviting emotion and self-reflexivity into learning environments, dialogue helps communicate to students and the university that students exist in the classroom as full individuals with complex histories and identities.
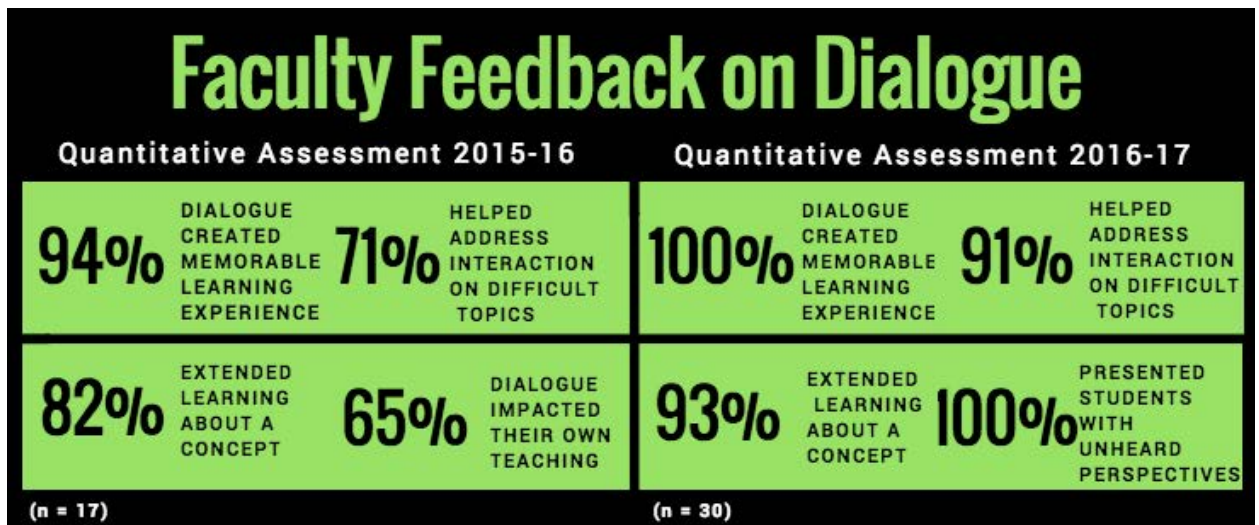
The graphics below reflect some of our assessment from the past two academic years, which aims to assess dialogues for listening across perspectives, self-reflection and self-discovery. (Note: Our student assessment questions changed between 2015-16 and 2016-17 as a result of our dialogues being the subject of a Spencer Foundation funded study, "Assessing deliberative spaces for engagement across difference: Two new civics measurement instruments," which the CU Dialogues Program collaborated on between 2015-17.)

Student Feedback on Dialogue

Quantitative Assessment 2015-16

96% UNDERSTOOD TOPIC FROM DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

91% PROVIDED A COMFORTABLE SPACE FOR CONVERSATION

95% BECAME AWARE OF PERSPECTIVES OTHER THAN MY OWN

64% THOUGHT OF INTERACTIONS ACROSS DIFFERENCE DIFFERENTLY

(n = 343)

Quantitative Assessment 2016-17

84% MANY DIFFERENT VIEWPOINTS WERE EXPRESSED

81% HEARING OTHER PEOPLE'S VIEWS MADE ME THINK ABOUT MY OWN POINT OF VIEW IN NEW WAYS

92% ABLE TO SEE THINGS FROM ANOTHER PERSON'S POINT OF VIEW

77% BECAME AWARE OF THEIR BIAS OR ASSUMPTIONS

(n = 571)

Qualitative student assessment consistently demonstrates that a classroom dialogue makes students aware of multiple perspectives within the university, reinforces their understanding of the course material, makes the subject matter more accessible, and provides them a lens to reflect on their own assumptions, as seen in the following comments:

- "This [dialogue] drew attention to the limited interaction I have with students and other individuals outside my race or ethnicity and how this is an impediment to personal growth and community building through multicultural understanding."

- "We've been studying various aspects of immigration in class and while that provides a lot of key information on the subject, hearing first-person stories and experiences about immigration during the dialogue provided self-awareness and deeper learning."

Faculty feedback shows that faculty value a facilitated classroom dialogue as a tool to provoke critical thinking, hear across perspectives, and supplement classroom learning, as demonstrated in the graphic and qualitative comments below.

Faculty Feedback on Dialogue

Quantitative Assessment 2015-16

94% DIALOGUE CREATED MEMORABLE LEARNING EXPERIENCE
71% HELPED ADDRESS INTERACTION ON DIFFICULT TOPICS
82% EXTENDED LEARNING ABOUT A CONCEPT
65% DIALOGUE IMPACTED THEIR OWN TEACHING
(n = 17)

Quantitative Assessment 2016-17

100% DIALOGUE CREATED MEMORABLE LEARNING EXPERIENCE
91% HELPED ADDRESS INTERACTION ON DIFFICULT TOPICS
93% EXTENDED LEARNING ABOUT A CONCEPT
100% PRESENTED STUDENTS WITH UNHEARD PERSPECTIVES
(n = 30)

- "Students noticed different perspectives within a homogenized class. They all commented that they would have liked to have heard other viewpoints [different cultures, backgrounds, etc.]."

- "I know from experience that students are permanently affected and influenced by engaging in a dialogue with members of our facilities team [community participants]. They hear about the rich histories, goals and dreams of people they see on a regular basis but don't know. It's transformational each and every time."

- "Many [students] noted they had never had a class like this and they liked being able to share their ideas and experiences in a safe space."

- "Students often do not speak as openly or willingly when the instructor is facilitating a conversation on race, stereotypes and culture. They tend to be more reserved thinking it is for a grade or a lecture rather than conversation."

Additional Impacts of Dialogue: Communication & Critical Thinking Skills

Beyond being an avenue for engaged learning, dialogue practice advances the Chancellor's strategic initiatives of "Shaping Tomorrow's Leaders" and "Inclusive Excellence" by offering opportunities to practice valuable communication and critical

thinking skills. All dialogues conducted across the curriculum encourage open sharing of multiple perspectives, invite reflective listening, generate critical thinking about complex issues, and build connections with the broader community in order to expand perspectives. These life skills are applicable inside and outside of the classroom and are highly desired in the workforce. A recent Washington Post article drawing on Cathy N. Davidson's book The New Education: How to Revolutionize the University to Prepare Students for a World in Flux Valerie Strauss reported on a 2013 study Google conducted on its workforce to identify factors of workplace success. As Davidson writes, "The seven top characteristics of success at Google are all soft skills: being a good coach; communicating and listening well; possessing insights into others (including others different values and points of view); having empathy toward and being supportive of one's colleagues; being a good critical thinker and problem solver; and being able to make connections across complex ideas." The skills Google identified as most important for workforce success are all developed through dialogue practice.

Making dialogue a universal component of campus experience

In organizing and facilitating dialogue experiences over the last nine years, the CU Dialogues Program has come to realize the real desire for facilitated conversations. This need is only growing in this increasingly polarized time. Our work has provided a starting point for establishing dialogue as a learning and discovery process, and it signals the exciting possibilities for expanding dialogue practice at CU Boulder. We in the CU Dialogues Program invite conversation about how this expansion can happen. As a small program (with 2 FTE), we serve as a resource to the campus for advancing dialogue practice, but we cannot (currently) meet the expansive need for dialogue that exists at CU and in our community. We are eager to help broadcast the power and need for dialogue as a learning and discovery process and to work with others across campus to help make dialogue a more universal aspect of CU's classroom experience and our broader campus climate.

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