

**Dialogue Class at U-Mass Boston
Syllabus for January 2009
Accelerated Winter Session**

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CrCrTH616
Wheatley 2-125
Hours: 6-9 PM, Mon-Thurs

Definition: Dialogue is designed to create meaning. The process works collectively within the context of a group that is developing skills in creative listening, suspending judgment and thinking about thinking.

Process: To practice the art of Dialogue requires a disciplined approach to how we speak and how we listen. The purpose of this special conversation is to bring out the inner wisdom of both individuals and the collective wisdom of a group. Dialogue calls for a whole new set of conversational skills.



Allyn

The emergent meaning of the Dialogue process moves through many diverse phases, like a river flowing through a rocky gorge.

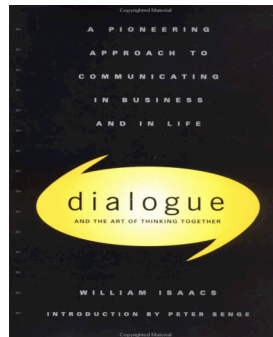


In Dialogue we learn to suspend judgment and thereby give enough space to the speaker to fully develop what he or she has to say. After that we may make use of an inquiry that arises from a deep place of wonderment within ourselves. That inquiry is addressed to the center of the group.

We also learn to recognize that each of us has only a partial view of a given topic and therefore need the collective views of the group to gain a more comprehensive view of the matter.

Course Requirements: Daily journal keeping
Reading: Text and handouts
Class participation
Two Experiments on the use of Dialogue
Final paper – Six pages

Text: William Isaacs, *Dialogue and the art of thinking together*, New York, Doubleday, 1999.



Text Book

Orientation

Each class session will consist of a review of the reading assignment in the text, as assigned, the development of skills related to the Dialogue process and, in addition, the practice of Dialogue.

Assignments

Daily journal keeping (16 points)

Preparation for Class and participation (12 x 2 = 24 points)

Two Experiments on the use of Dialogue (2 x 15 points)

Final paper - Six pages (30 points)

1. Read the Forward and Introduction in the text.
2. **Chapter 1. PP 7-28. A Conversation with a Center, not Sides.** In Dialogue we address the whole group. We risk ourselves in the process, not knowing what response we will get. We speak from the first person, not from borrowed authority or opinions.
3. **Chapter 2. PP 49-109. Why We Think alone and What We Can Do About it.** As Bill Isaacs writes in this chapter: "To think is to sense the emerging potential of a situation, to perceive what is not yet visible, and to give it voice. To think is also to listen to our own automatic reactions and gain perspective on them."

First paper due.

4. **Chapters 3-4. PP 71-109. The Timeless Way of Conversation and Listening.** Practicing empathic listening: Without listening, there is no learning. A conversation is a two way street, with give and take on both sides. In a larger group it can also come from all sides exchanging views and opinions, seeking the wholeness that transcends points of view of individuals.

5. **Chapter 5-6, PP 110-158. Respecting and Suspending.** When we listen with respect we are, in effect, honoring the other person or persons. We suspend judgment and look for value in what they say. We listen in a learning mode. We have all felt the painful rejection of someone across a desk who is preoccupied. Respect and Suspending Judgment frees us up from stereotypical assumptions.
6. **Chapter 7-8 PP, 159 to 202. Voicing and Patterns of Advocacy and Inquiry.** Our voice contains countless inflections that convey meaning, purpose and desire. As the great Persian poet, Rumi conveys in these lines: *"Define a narrow me and you starve yourself of yourself. Nail me down in a box of cold words and that box is your coffin...Why won't you admit that who I am is not your perception?"*
7. **Chapter 9, PP 203 to 238. Overcoming Structural Traps,** Open, Closed and Random Systems paradigms characterize our institutions, though like all systems, they are often too near to us or too distant for us to perceive them. Families, Schools, Churches and Businesses all operate with functions that are systemic. Since systems are unseen and unpredictable they are extremely difficult to change.
8. **Chapter 10-11, PP 239 to 279. Setting The Container and Fields of Conversation,** The Container holds the conversation together like a basket of fruit. The Container creates an environment of mutual trust and respect because it establishes the norms of the Dialogue process. Though the Dialogue group will pass through many different phases of development, there is always the Container there to hold it together.

Second Paper Due

9. **Chapter 11 continues through to Chapter 13, PP 279 to 310. Field IV, Convening Dialogue and The Ecology of Thought.** As Bill Isaacs tells us, "In the fourth space of Dialogue people become quite understanding of one another's inability to be articulate, because they experience their own limits...There can be a space of immense discovery—on where we find, for instance, that the language we use tends to blind us to certain experiences."
10. **Chapter 13 continues through to Chapter 15 page 350.** In this reading, Isaacs takes up the theme from ancient Greek literature of the Good, the True and the Beautiful. All three of these, he points out, are now separated from each other and therefore dysfunctional. The Good becomes tyrannical and oppressive. The Truth becomes mere scientific fact. Beauty, with out the implications of the Good and the objective constraints of the True is false.
11. **Chapter 15 continues through to page 413.** Here Isaacs finds ways of restoring the place of The Good, The True and The Beautiful in our society and culture, though it is in a very different context than where it originated in ancient Greece.
12. An article by Otto Scharmer regarding Generative Dialogue, which takes the process beyond the circle held together by a Container and takes Dialogue into the application of change in the context of Social Technology.