

Grasping the Theory of Dialogue

Dialogue, as we have seen, is a practice for deliberately and consciously evoking powerful conversations. But while it is a practice, and even an art form, it cannot be described solely in terms of technique. There is no recipe for “getting started with dialogue.”

A key reason for this lies in the difference between conducting a dialogue and other forms of facilitation. In dialogue, you yourself are part of the method. You cannot be separated from it. To engage in dialogue is to engage with yourself in a profoundly new way. There are no steps that you can use on others, independent of how you yourself function. There are, however, definite and reliable practices to follow— if not steps to take— that determine whether the conditions for dialogue are present or not.

That’s why you need to understand the theory and principles of Dialogue— the interlocking forces that determine “how and why” dialogue works. Without an underlying theory about why things work— in this case, why and where dialogue is effective— we can go only a short distance toward proficiency.

And without a theory we will never be able to sustain the practice of dialogue beyond a small group of intuitive “masters” because we will always have slightly different, shifting standards about what success is and what should or should not be included. And we will always get relatively unpredictable results. We must go beyond this to a basic theory of dialogue and outline why such theory making can no longer remain the provenance of academics. Admittedly, many people have a kind of allergic reaction to studying theory— it seems too academic to them: **“Just tell me what to do!”**

But I will suggest this: To open yourself to begin to understand the theory behind dialogue is to open yourself up to the forces that make human endeavors effective or not. Once you are aware of these forces, you can no longer simply blame people for situations that don’t work out. And you can begin to set up conversations that will engender better results.

Isaacs, William. Dialogue: The Art of Thinking Together (p. 71). The Crown Publishing Group.