A Guide to Different Forms of Discourse

The Deliberative Citizenship Initiative

What is Discourse?

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines discourse as the "action or process of communicating thought by means of the spoken or written word."

Examples of Discourse

Discourse includes speeches, lectures, and trainings that are primarily unidirectional as well as forums, panels, and symposiums that can be both unidirectional and multi-directional. They include informal interventions, formal trials and inquisitions, organized negotiations and workshops, and unstructured brainstorms and "downloads."

In this guide, however, we focus on five common types of discourse -- **conversations, discussions, dialogues, deliberations, and debates.** These terms are used widely, quite differently, and often interchangeably. This guide is designed to help us develop a more common understanding of the similarities and differences among these forms of discourse.
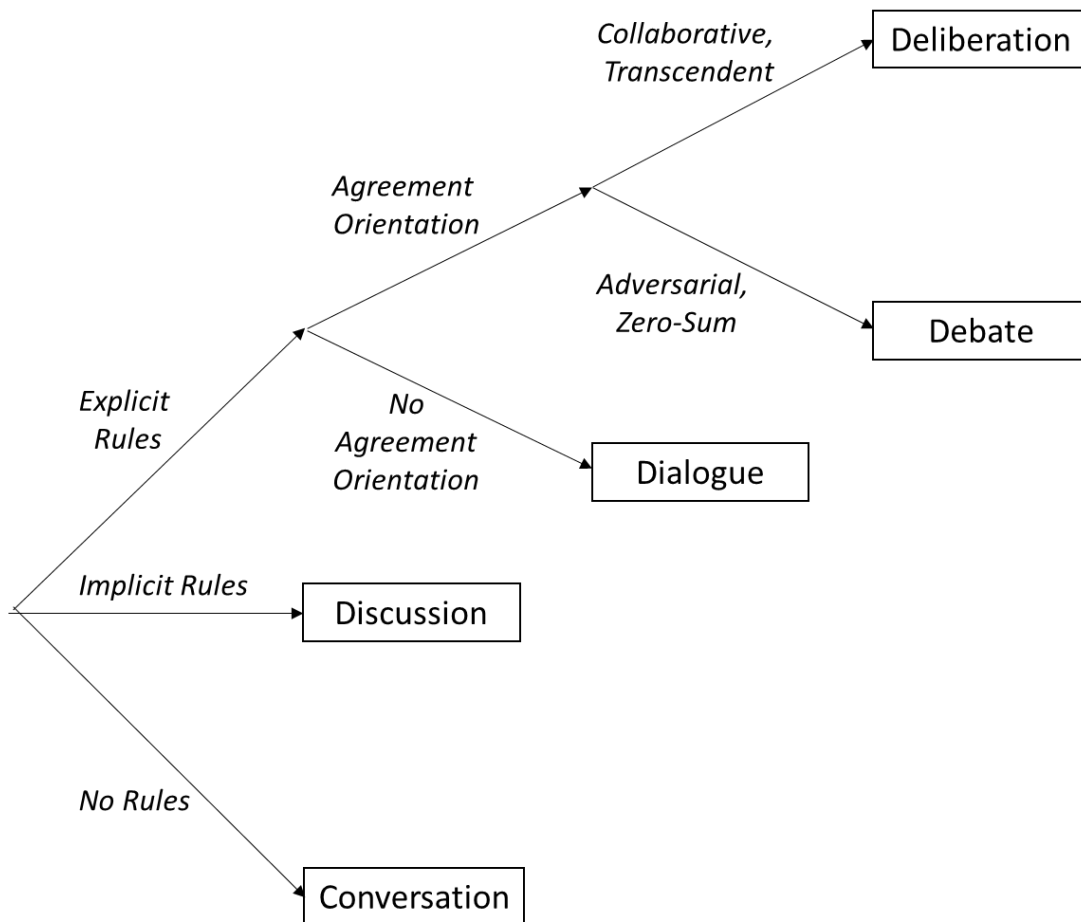
A Common Framework

We recognize that definitions of these terms vary greatly and often depend on the context and culture in which they are used. Specific examples may also incorporate elements from multiple forms of discourse. But we also recognize that a **shared understanding** of the meaning of these terms can help us – both as individuals and as a community -- more easily identify and articulate the goals of particular discourses that we participate in, host, or facilitate.

According to the framework we have developed and is introduced in this guide, these five forms of discourse share one common characteristic – they are all **multi-directional**, in the way that a lecture or speech is not. But they differ in many additional ways, including the extent to which they are interactive, rule-based, facilitated, Learning-oriented, persuasion-oriented, agreement-oriented, adversarial, zero-sum, collaborative, and transcendent. The sections on each type of discourse explain further below.

Key Differences

The figure below highlights some of the key differences between these five different forms of discourse. Conversation differs from the other forms in its lack of any particular rules, while discussion differs from dialogue, debate, and deliberation in its lack of explicit rules. While it may result in improved understanding, dialogue differs from debate and deliberation in its lack of orientation toward some form of specific agreement – either in terms of *shared* understanding or commitments or recognition of "winners" and "losers." Debate differs from deliberation in its adversarial, zero-sum nature, as deliberation is more collaborative and attempts to transcend past positions with new conceptions and understandings.

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                                          Collaborative,        ┌──────────────┐
                                          Transcendent          │ Deliberation │
                                                                └──────────────┘
        Agreement
        Orientation
                                          Adversarial,          ┌──────────┐
                                          Zero-Sum              │  Debate  │
                                                                └──────────┘
  Explicit          No
  Rules             Agreement
                    Orientation           ┌──────────┐
                                          │ Dialogue │
                                          └──────────┘

  Implicit Rules    ┌────────────┐
                    │ Discussion │
                    └────────────┘

  No Rules          ┌──────────────┐
                    │ Conversation │
                    └──────────────┘
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The Five Types

The following sections introduces the etymology and definitions from the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) of these five types of discourse. They also provide definitions more customized to the context of the Davidson College Deliberative Citizenship Initiative, brief descriptions of what they are and are not, and a short example highlighting some of their key characteristics.

Conversation

Etymology: *Com* = "with" and *Vertare* = "to turn;" *Conversation*: "to turn about with"

OED Definition: Interchange of thoughts and words, familiar discourse or talk.

DCI Definition: An unstructured discourse involving an interchange of thoughts and information on one or more topics.

What it is: Interactive, Learning-Oriented

What it is not: Rule-Based, Facilitated, Adversarial, Zero-Sum, Persuasion-Oriented, Agreement-Oriented

Example: A group of people are talking over dinner about a **wide range of topics.** They are sharing news and ideas with no particular interest in persuading each other. While not an explicit goal, they enjoy learning new things as they engage with each other. There is **no facilitator** of the conversation and **no guidelines** they are following. They are not necessarily looking for agreement and have **no particular goal** in conversing with one another other than sharing information and connecting with one another.

Discussion

Etymology: *Dis* – "apart" and *Quatere* = "to shake;" *Discussion*: ""to shake apart"

OED Definition: Treatment of a subject, in speech or writing, in which the various facts, opinions, and issues relating to it are considered

DCI Definition: A structured discourse oriented towards mapping different positions and ideas related to a particular topic

What it is: Interactive, Implicitly or Explicitly Rule-Based, Learning-Oriented, Persuasion-Oriented, and Sometimes Facilitated

What it is not: Adversarial, Zero-Sum, Agreement-Oriented

Example: A group of people are meeting to **talk about a particular topic** of mutual interest. They could be in a classroom, a book club, or a business conference room. They have an agenda but **no specific ground rules** for their discussion or a specific interest in finding agreement. They **simply want to learn** more about the topic from each other. While some of them may have an interest in persuading the others that a particular perspective on the issue is important and worth considering, they are not focused on convincing the group of the superiority of a particular viewpoint or course of action.

Dialogue

Etymology: *Dia* = "through," "between," "across;" *Logos* = "meaning," "reason," *Dialogue* = "flow of meaning"

OED Definition: A conversation carried on between two or more people

DCI Definition: A structured discourse oriented towards revealing and understanding underlying experiences, interests, assumptions, and values related to a particular topic

What it is: Explicitly Rule-Based, Learning-Oriented, Sometimes Interactive, and Best Facilitated

What it is not: Adversarial, Zero-Sum, Persuasion-Oriented, Agreement-Oriented

Example: A group of people sits down with a **facilitator** to share their perspectives on **an issue**. They listen to each other respectfully, asking **clarifying questions** occasionally but not interrogating or arguing with them. They aim to learn from each other about their different perspectives and not to persuade them of any particular position or argument. With the assistance of the facilitator, they follow some explicit **ground rules** that they agree to initially to enable a deep exploration of their different experiences, assumptions, and values. They may come to some improved understanding of each others' perspectives and experiences, but there is no orientation towards or expectation of specific agreements, decisions, or actions.

Debate

Etymology: *De* = "down," "completely" *Batre* = "beat;" *Debate* = "to resolve by beating down"

OED Definition: Contention in argument

DCI Definition: A structured discourse oriented towards highlighting differences, exposing weaknesses, and identifying which position is the strongest and most-supported.

What it is: Explicitly Rule-Based, Adversarial, Zero-Sum, Persuasion-Oriented, Agreement-Oriented, Sometimes Interactive, and Best Facilitated

What it is not: Collaborative, Transcendent

Example: A group of people gather to present their views on a **particular topic**. They each have a specific viewpoint on this issue and they are committed to demonstrating its superiority to alternative viewpoints. With rules that they have all agreed on, they are looking forward to a **clear outcome** to their debate that identifies a winner and a loser. They believe such an **adversarial contest** encourages precision, accuracy, and high-quality discourse that advances our understanding of complex topics.

Deliberation

Etymology: *De* = "Completely," *Librare* = "to balance, weigh," *Deliberare* = "consider well"

OED Definition: Careful consideration with a view to a decision

DCI Definition: A structured discourse focused on building both shared and new understandings of a particular issue that transcend previously-held positions and enable collective decisions and actions.

What it is: Explicitly Rule-Based, Collaborative, Transcendent, Agreement-Oriented, Sometimes Persuasion-Oriented, and Best Facilitated

What it is not: Adversarial, Zero-Sum

Example: A group of people come together to **collaboratively improve their understanding of a specific topic**. While aware that it may take time, they are committed to articulating some novel ways to understand this issue that they can agree **builds on but also transcends** each of their own individual perspectives. Where appropriate and relevant, they also hope to identify some **decisions they can make and actions they can take** that reflects this new understanding.

This guide was developed by Dr. Graham Bullock and Kyle Broxton '22. The etymological sections are adapted from Longo, N. and T. Shaffer. 2019. "Discussing Democracy: Learning to Talk Together." In Creating Space for Democracy: A Primer on Dialogue and Deliberation in Higher Education. Stylus: Sterling, VA.