

A Supplement to

## Dialogue: Skills for Classroom and Community

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# Dialogue Activities for Election Debates & Current Events

Every year citizens of the United States go to the polls to vote. They are deciding on candidates, ballot initiatives, and the controversial issues of the day.

As we write this skills guide, it is a presidential election season in the United States. Students all over the country will be assigned to watch debates, particularly the presidential debates between Barak Obama and Mitt Romney. We know that your students will not hear nor see the following actions when those two candidates share a stage:

Mr. Obama turns to Mr. Romney and says, “You’ve raised an important view. I hadn’t thought about it that way.”

Mr. Romney sets aside his prepared remarks and says to Mr. Obama, “I’m sorry I said that really sarcastic joke about your party. It was much meaner than I meant it to be.”

Presidential debates are contests, modern duels with words, designed to propel forward a winner, and leave behind a loser. As soon as the debates are over, commentators will tally up their score cards, and many students will be asked to report on which person won the debate. This assessment of winners and losers follows the purpose of the debate: to convince voters to make an absolute choice between two people. Later in the week, many teachers will replicate the structure and style of those debates as a method of involving students in our democratic political process. Throughout the school year as well, when there are compelling conversations with many strong opinions, someone in the class will shout out, “Let’s have a debate!” It’s the method of public discourse we are most accustomed to hearing.

Conversely, the imaginary bits of dialogue above contain aspects of social skills we most want students to demonstrate day-to-day. We want them to learn from each other, even when they have differing perspectives. We want them to speak respectfully, even in the heat of the moment, and to apologize for their miscues. We want them to come to shared understandings and mutually satisfying solutions, even when they can see only the faults in each other’s ideas.

Our public conversations in election seasons so rarely provide examples to young people of those critical social skills. These dialogue skills are an alternative to winner-take-all election

debates. The dialogue curriculum affirms that a deeper understanding of candidates, ballot initiatives, and current events happen when students share their perspectives and knowledge in an effort to increase everyone's understanding, and ultimately increase the wisdom we need to meet the challenges facing our nation.

Among many ways to use the dialogue curriculum this election season, we offer these approaches after you introduce your students to the skills in the curriculum:

- 1) Have them watch the national, state, or local debates using our "Viewer's Guide." The students can still assess which candidate they think won; the guide will allow them to develop other ideas.
- 2) Read newspaper editorials, listen to talk radio, and watch the various political talk shows. Have the students compare each of these forums, based on the skills they have learned about dialogue. Which of the formats support greater understanding of complexity and offered a synthesis of various perspectives, and in what ways? Which formats undermined a shared understanding and compelled the viewers to pick sides, and what happened to bring about that end game?
- 3) Follow our "Holding a Dialogue" format guides with your students so they can experience the dialogue alternative to our standard political discourse. You will find the formats in *Dialogue: Skills for Classroom and Community*, found on the Leaders & Learners' website, [LeadersAndLearners.org](http://LeadersAndLearners.org).

This curriculum applies during non-presidential election years as well, when other officials are being elected, ballot initiatives are voted on, or controversial issues arise in school, the community, or larger world. It would be refreshing to hear a student shout out, "Let's have a dialogue!"

Whichever approaches you try, send us your stories; the other teachers in our network will be interested in what your classes have done. We'll send tweets with updates.

## Viewer's Guide for Dialogues, Debates, and Public Conversations

When you see evidence of:	Check here	When you see evidence of:	Check here
<p><b>Getting ready for a dialogue</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>engaged stance</li> <li>appropriate privacy</li> <li>opening statements invite exchange</li> <li>agreements set tone</li> </ul> <p>Notes:</p>		<p><b>Getting ready to win</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>oppositional stance</li> <li>audience adds pressure</li> <li>opening statements attack</li> <li>competitive rules</li> </ul> <p>Notes:</p>	
<p><b>Offers positions and interests</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>all participants' underlying interests identified</li> <li>respect shown for all participants' interests</li> </ul> <p>Notes:</p>		<p><b>Offers only positions and demands</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ignores similar interests</li> <li>positions repeated</li> <li>distorts others' positions and interests</li> </ul> <p>Notes:</p>	
<p><b>Managing emotions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>keeps calm</li> <li>no triggering language</li> <li>reframes emotionally charged moments</li> </ul> <p>Notes:</p>		<p><b>Using emotions to win</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>uses anger to overwhelm others</li> <li>uses taunts, sarcasm, innuendo</li> <li>gains from others' discomfort</li> </ul> <p>Notes:</p>	
<p><b>Listening to understand</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>open body language/expression</li> <li>stretches perspective</li> <li>encouragement</li> <li>summarizes fairly</li> </ul> <p>Notes:</p>		<p><b>Listening to win</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>hostile body language/expression</li> <li>interruptions</li> <li>closed to new perspectives</li> <li>summarizes unfairly</li> </ul> <p>Notes:</p>	
<p><b>Questions for a dialogue</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>asks for clarification</li> <li>shows curiosity, admits lack of info</li> <li>supports the other person to explain</li> </ul> <p>Notes:</p>		<p><b>Questions to win</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>statements disguised as questions</li> <li>prompts defensiveness</li> <li>no acknowledgment of learning</li> </ul> <p>Notes:</p>	
<p><b>Speaks from one's own perspective</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>explains one's own needs, experiences, beliefs</li> <li>disagrees respectfully</li> </ul> <p>Notes:</p>		<p><b>Speaks about the other people</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>speaks as if representing others' needs, beliefs, experiences</li> <li>blames and demeans others</li> </ul> <p>Notes:</p>	
<p><b>Building community &amp; solutions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>names common ground</li> <li>explores many options</li> <li>strives for mutual decision-making</li> </ul> <p>Notes:</p>		<p><b>Solutions for one perspective</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>polarizes issues</li> <li>options limited to starting positions</li> <li>strives to have one's own idea win</li> </ul> <p>Notes:</p>	