

Developing Student Listening and Dialogue Skills

Students need the deeper learning that comes from dialogue with their instructors and peers. They need to be able to express their understanding of concepts in their own words, have them challenged by others, and defend their understanding in the face of alternative understandings. This results in the refinement of their mental models of key course concepts, which they are more likely to be able to recall and use later, when working in their chosen profession.

A too-often-missing ingredient in dialogue is listening. Yes, we get to talk. But first we have to listen. Really listen, not just biding our time while others talk and we are formulating what we want to say, resulting in the proverbial dialogue of the deaf, where people stick to their lines and talk past each other.

What We Want to Happen When Students Listen

We want to enhance listening as the beginning step of dialogue, where there is a meeting of the minds as ideas are exchanged. Dialogue and debate can be seen as opposite ends of a continuum. Most people are good at debate, on the one hand and polite conversation, in the middle, but not skilful discussion and dialogue.

Attentive listening is about building rapport, understanding and trust. It involves hearing and understanding, and then letting the other person know by summarizing the speaker's points in your own words before proceeding with your spoken contribution. It includes respectful attention, active responding, and a certain degree of empathy, or at least a genuine attempt to look at things from the speaker's point of view.

The process of attentive listening and reflecting back what was said can also help the speaker clarify her or his thoughts because it provides feedback to the speaker on how she or he is being perceived. It helps the speaker think and articulate more clearly (especially when clarifying questions are asked), and helps the listener see the bigger picture as she or he rehearses summarization while listening.

Listening for the purpose of participating in genuine dialogue: (Glaser)

- (1) Emphasizes conversation as a 2-way activity, where the focus is on the other person's views as well as your own (creating shared views that come from the conversation).
- (2) Is open-ended, even playful in its approach and requires modesty, humility and trust.
- (3) Focuses on the conversation that is happening between the participants, not what is (or we may assume to be) going on in the minds of the parties involved. You are co-creating meaning between you.

We can think of listening as having four dimensions: (Helin, 4ff.)

1. **Relational:** Conversation is a shared, relational activity. We co-create a space where we explore ideas and are heard. In this space is intersubjectivity, presence, relational foundation, and “utterance chains”—connecting what you are saying or otherwise indicating (uttering is not just talking) to what comes before it. It is a joint space of exploring over which no single participant has control.
2. **Co-ownership:** Listening is the active process of co-creating meaning.
3. **Multidirectional:** Listening is polyphonic—there are a number of voices, and no one-to-one correlation between number of listeners and number of viewpoints. One person can voice many perspectives and one perspective can be voiced by many participants. Your inner voice is also one of the participants—you don’t have to stifle your views and opinions and focus only on those of others.
4. **Multisensory:** Listening is an embodied activity that engages all our senses, mind and emotions. Listening is more than the mechanics of hearing. It is using all of the foregoing to create understanding. Utterances affect us and the other participants and we notice this and take it into account.

How to Help Students Learn Listening Skills

The first thing instructors can do is model attentive listening in their interactions with students. Then explain what attentive listening is, its purpose, and use examples from your own interactions with students to illustrate key parts of the process.

Maintain eye contact as a way of indicating interest. Sometimes silence can be a technique to draw out further detail.

In group discussion, have someone summarize periodically. Otherwise, group members leave with differing understandings.

When it is your time to speak, and you disagree with some of the points the speaker made, disagree without making it personal. Separate the idea from the person. Reflect that in the respectful, non-judgmental language you use. Focus on the ideas, not the speaker’s personality, assumed motives, or other traits.

Students should be encouraged, while listening, to formulate and ask questions to help them better understand what the speaker is saying. The list below can assist:

The Art of Questioning:

Four main types of questions are (Grohol):

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1. **Indirect Questions** (e.g., “Would you like to elaborate on that?” “What would happen if?” “Could you tell me more?”). These avoid directing the speaker and instead let her or him explain things more fully from their point of view.
2. **Open-ended Questions** that invite further conversation (e.g., “How? What? Where? Who? Which?”).
3. **Closed-ended Questions** that prompt for specifics, to get clarification (e.g., lead with: “Is? Are? Do? Did? Can? Could? Would?”). The goal is to ask for specifics in ways that encourage the other participant’s exploration and articulation of their facts and evidence, without challenging them directly.
4. **Reflective Questions** that reassure participants that you empathize and invite them to expand on what they said if they wish. They’re often used for issues that are emotionally evocative (e.g., “I see you feel very strongly about this. Do you want to tell me more about it?”).

Analyzing Statements:

Students then analyze what the other speaker said. This may not be so much a separate stage but something that occurs while listening attentively and asking clarifying questions.

Things to consider when analyzing statements: (Marchel, 15)

- Personal stories don’t usually prove a point. How typical is the experience? Could it be an outlier? Evidence and data are needed, not anecdotes.
- Appeals to instinct, common knowledge, laws of nature (when they are really social conventions) are not a solid basis on which to support ideas.
- Correlation does not mean cause-and-effect (e.g., making the assertion that an increase in the number of female students and an increase in class mark average is because women are better at academics).
- Emotional language does not substitute for evidence.
- Notice unstated assumptions (e.g., class attendance is down, so what can we do to get encourage more students to attend regularly? Assumption is that students who are not attending are not doing the work or learning the material.)
- Notice when the use of black-and-white, yes-no statements may be obscuring the situation (e.g., “Is it lack of interest or lack of ability?” Maybe it’s neither, something you haven’t thought of yet, and considering only two options inhibits understanding.)

The listening student then summarizes her or his understanding of the previous speaker’s main points and awaits an affirmative response, to show that the speaker just finishing has been heard and taken seriously. The student then connects what they are saying to what was said before (something specific if possible), taking into account their analysis of the situation.

Arts (Mini) Nonexample and Example

Angry Serial Monologues	The Attentive Listening Approach
<p>Student 1: “Unions should be outlawed. They just inflate wages, increase prices, and drive companies bankrupt. Look at GM, or mining, or manufacturing. They drive wages through the roof and make our industries uncompetitive, so that our jobs are outsourced to developing countries where the wage rates are low.”</p>	<p>Student 1: “Unions should be outlawed. They just inflate wages, increase prices, and drive companies bankrupt. Look at GM, or mining, or manufacturing. They drive wages through the roof and make our industries uncompetitive, so that our jobs are outsourced to developing countries where the wage rates are low.”</p>
<p>Student 2: “Unions prevent abuse of employees and level the playing field in terms of the power relationship between all-powerful management and powerless individual employees. The examples you’re citing are failures of managers to manage and bargain properly. Are you in favour of slave labour in Asian sweatshops? As long as we can find a dictator who can force thousands of desperate people to work pennies an hour, then that’s what wages we should be satisfied with here?”</p>	<p>Student 2: <i>(asking clarifying questions, ignoring the emotional opening statement)</i> “Can you explain how higher wages in one company can cause inflation, since companies have no control over market prices, which are set by supply and consumer demand?” <i>(trying to get student to examine assumptions and evidence)</i></p>
<p>Student 1: “That’s all just socialist rhetoric. Everyone knows that unions just lead to hyperinflated wages and loss of management control over the workplace, lower quality product, and having companies from other countries that are non-unionized eating our lunch.”</p>	<p>Student 1: “Well, the company just passes on higher wages as a business cost in the form of higher prices.”</p>
<p>Student 2: “And you’re just spouting the ideological clichés of the 1%. If big business had its way, there’d be no permanent jobs, no minimum wage, and unemployment would be so high that people would be desperate to take any job, however crappy. You can’t sustain an economy on such jobs.”</p>	<p>Student 2: “But according to classical economics, individual companies are price takers, not price makers. So if company A raises its prices, other companies will outsell them and A’s sales and revenue will drop.”</p>
<p>Student 1: “Well, if people want better jobs, they should work their way into management or start their own companies.”</p>	<p>Student 1: “Well, big companies have some control over pricing, especially if several the other big companies face similar cost pressures from unions.”</p>
<p>Student 2: “There are only so many management jobs—someone has to actually do something useful. Plus, 90% of first-time entrepreneurs fail. People need to make a decent living wage and have some job security before they will buy all the crap that companies</p>	<p>Student 2: “So, you’re saying that unions’ wage demands drive up production costs, and large companies facing similar wage pressures can increase prices without suffering relative loss of sales.”</p>

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Angry Serial Monologues	The Attentive Listening Approach
make. Workers have to make this happen themselves, since business bosses never will.”	
<i>(Everyone feels better for having vented, but there was no real exchange of ideas.)</i>	Student 1: “It’s a bit more complex than that, but yeah.”
	<p>Student 2: “Then I would contend that since large companies are powerful enough to exert control over their markets, and not be subject to consumer sovereignty and normal supply and demand, then employees need a countervailing power in the form of a union in order to protect their interests, along the lines depicted by Peter Galbraith and the Harvard School of Economics.”</p> <p><i>(Respectful attention and clarifying questions lower the emotional element and shift focus to facts and evidence. Then student 2 connects her or his point to something in student 1’s statement. The result is the beginnings of dialogue in which ideas are exchanged.)</i></p>

Science (Mini) Nonexample and Example

Instructor: “How does natural selection work? Explain it to your neighbour and come up with an agreed-upon explanation and be ready to report back.”

Talking Past Each Other	The Active Listening Approach
Student 1: “Nature acts on genetic mutations to give higher forms of life.”	Student 1: “Nature acts on genetic mutations to give higher forms of life.”
Student 2: “If we’re talking about animals, genetic mutations are always harmful. It’s micromutations.”	Student 2: “Can you clarify the scale of mutations you mean—macro or micro?”
Student 1: “Whatever. Nature acts on micromutations to develop higher forms of life.”	Student 1: “I guess it would be micro, I think that’s what the professor said.”
Student 2: “Nature doesn’t act on anything. That’s an anthropomorphism. It’s about micromutations that happen to be advantageous in an ecological niche.”	Student 2: “How does nature work on micromutations?”
Student 1: “It’s nature working with micromutations to evolve lower life forms into higher ones.”	Student 1: “Some micromutations confer advantages that are passed on to offspring.”

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Talking Past Each Other	The Active Listening Approach
<p>Student 2: “I’ve already said that nature is not some entity that acts on its own volition. Evolution is more passive than that.”</p>	<p>Student 2: “I’m trying to think of an example.”</p>
<p><i>(Frustration for both parties.)</i></p>	<p>Student 1: “If a rabbit had a micromutation that gave it longer ears, that would give it an advantage”</p>
	<p>Student 2: “How so?”</p>
	<p>Student 1: “It could hear predators earlier than other rabbits, and escape, live longer, and have more offspring that also had longer ears.”</p>
	<p>Student 2: “So over time, a larger percentage of all rabbits would have longer ears.” <i>(This is not so much a summary of everything student 1 has said, but a confirmation that student 2 had followed the argument and understands it.)</i></p>
	<p>Student 1: “Right.”</p>
	<p>Student 2: “So, by nature just taking its course over time on the small percentage of micromutations that are advantageous in the applicable ecological niches, genetic copy errors are turned into changed physical traits over long periods of time.”</p>
	<p>Student 1: “That sounds like a decent summary.”</p>
<p><i>(Respectful attention and clarifying questions keep the focus on facts and evidence. Then student 2 connects her or his point to something in student 1’s statement. This leads to the intended outcome.)</i></p>	

Context and Approach

There are many different contexts in which listening skills are beneficial. We are focusing on one typical situation: classroom lectures. Let’s consider instructor-led discussion of the lecture material, usually at strategic intervals. One of the main points of classroom discussion is to create the conditions for students’ deeper understanding of concepts by having them articulate their current understanding and having it challenged by other students. A key component often missing from the process is “hearing” what a student speaker is saying and then having the next speaker connect what she or he wants to say to what the previous speaker has said. That requires attentive listening on the part of the next speaker, some restatement of the current speaker’s points, and adjustment of the next speakers’ statements to fit what has just been said. A dialogue rather than serial monologues.

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Explain the above process, and the reasons for using it (“Your quality of understanding will be much better if you explain your understanding to someone else and respond to their clarifying questions and their version of the concept. You will be more likely to recall and use this information permanently.”)

Have resource materials available (see the video links below, and consider and modify for your context the items in “Things to Post that Shape Students Thinking,” below).

Video Resources

Julian Treasure: 5 Ways to Listen Better:

http://www.ted.com/talks/julian_treasure_5_ways_to_listen_better

10 Ways to Have a Better Conversation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R1vskiVDwl4Effective>

Listening Skills: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ENkUBPhMJw>

Practice Reflective Listening: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NhJYNUYNH-Y>

Things to Try

1. Modeling:
 - a. Model listening, asking clarifying questions, and linking what you say next to what the student speaker has just finished saying as you interact with students in a question-and-answer format.
 - b. Provide class demonstrations with a script (maybe video clips or scenarios that exemplify? Role play with a few students?). Create listening checklists for students based on items in the “Things to Post” section that follows.
 - c. Provide “fish bowl” demonstrations of the above, stopping at strategic points to ask for ideas on kinds of questions to ask.
2. Providing Guided Practice in:
 - a. Determining the right questions (open ended, neutral in tone, designed to elicit further clarification and explanation. If direct & specific, they are to acknowledge that you have heard and the question makes the speaker think and cite evidence or reasoning) (e.g., “Explain why you think that.” “Explain your thinking.” “I am curious about why you think that—can you tell me more about it?” “I wonder what others think about that. Does anyone have a reaction to that point?” “Let’s all share our perspective on that point.”). See “The Art of Questioning” above.
 - b. Visual cues and reminders (Post such things as “Challenge assumption.” “Don’t rush to give advice.” “What are the right questions to ask?”
 - c. Group analysis using checklists (modify relevant items from the following section).
 - d. Large group review of the listening and dialogue process.
 - e. Have students keep a journal that traces how attentive listening has improved their understanding of course topics.

Things to Post that Shape Students' Thinking

The following items could be posted around the classroom or in Desire2Learn to serve as reference and resource materials to help get students on track and keep them there.

Listening Competencies

"Listening is the process of receiving, constructing meaning from, and responding to spoken and or nonverbal messages. People listen in order to comprehend information, critique and evaluate a message..." (Morreale, pp. 9-10)

A. Recognize Main Ideas.

1. Distinguish ideas fundamental to the thesis from material that supports those ideas.
2. Identify transitional, organizational, and nonverbal cues that direct the listener to the main ideas.
3. Identify the main ideas in structured and unstructured discourse.

B. Identify Supporting Details.

1. Identify supporting details in spoken messages.
2. Distinguish between those ideas that support the main ideas and those that do not.
3. Determine whether the number of supporting details adequately develops each main idea.

C. Recognize Relationships Among Ideas.

1. Demonstrate an understanding of the types of organizational or logical relationships.
2. Identify transitions that suggest relationships.
3. Determine whether the asserted relationship exists.

D. Recall Basic Ideas and Details.

1. Determine the goal for listening.
2. State the basic cognitive and affective contents, after listening.

Critical Comprehension Competencies

The competent listener must also listen with critical comprehension. Specifically, the competent listener should exhibit the following competencies by demonstrating the abilities included under each statement (Morreale, pp. 10-12).

A. Listen attentively with an Open Mind.

1. Demonstrate an awareness of personal, ideological, and emotional biases.
2. Demonstrate awareness that each person has a unique perspective.
3. Demonstrate awareness that one's knowledge, experience, and emotions affect listening.

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4. Use verbal and nonverbal behaviors that demonstrate willingness to listen to messages when variables such as setting, speaker, or topic may not be conducive to listening.

B. Perceive the Speaker's Purpose and Organization of Ideas and Information.

1. Identify the speaker's purpose.
2. Identify the organization of the speaker's ideas and information.

C. Discriminate Between Statements of Fact and Statements of Opinion.

1. Distinguish between assertions that are verifiable and those that are not.

D. Distinguish Between Emotional and Logical Arguments.

1. Demonstrate an understanding that arguments have both emotional and logical dimensions.
2. Identify the logical characteristics of an argument.
3. Identify the emotional characteristics of an argument.
4. Identify whether the argument is predominantly emotional or logical.

E. Detect Bias.

1. Identify instances of bias in a spoken message.
2. Specify how bias may affect the impact of a spoken message.

F. Recognize the Speaker's Attitude.

1. Identify the direction, intensity, and salience of the speaker's attitude as reflected by the verbal messages.
2. Identify the direction, intensity, and salience of the speaker's attitude as reflected by the nonverbal messages.

G. Synthesize and Evaluate by Drawing Logical Inferences and Conclusions.

1. Draw relationships between prior knowledge and the information provided by the speaker.
2. Demonstrate an understanding of the nature of inference.
3. Identify the types of verbal and nonverbal information.
4. Draw valid inferences from the information.
5. Identify the information as evidence to support views.
6. Assess the acceptability of evidence.
7. Identify patterns of reasoning and judge the validity of arguments.
8. Analyze the information and inferences in order to draw conclusions.

H. Recall the Implications and Arguments.

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1. Identify the arguments used to justify the speaker's position.
2. State both the overt and implied arguments.
3. Specify the implications of these arguments for the speaker, audience, and society at large.

I. Recognize Discrepancies between the Speaker's Verbal and Nonverbal Messages.

1. Identify when the nonverbal signals contradict the verbal message.
2. Identify when the nonverbal signals understate or exaggerate the verbal message.
3. Identify when the nonverbal message is irrelevant to the verbal message.

J. Employ Active Listening Techniques when Appropriate.

1. Identify the cognitive and affective dimensions of a message.
2. Demonstrate comprehension by formulating questions that clarify or qualify the speaker's content and affective intent.
3. Demonstrate comprehension by paraphrasing the speaker's message.

Seven Steps of Skillful Dialogue (Ryan):

1. **Listen deeply.** Focus only on what the other person is saying.
2. **Listen respectfully.** Doesn't mean you agree. It means you allow time and space for them to fully explain their view or make their point and you accept it as a worthwhile perspective.
3. **Inquire.** Ask open-ended questions and/or questions that ask for specifics in a way that encourages others to explore their assumptions and evidence.
4. **Voice openly.** Share your real thoughts on the matter, calmly and in a way that shows respect by connecting your thoughts with those that have been expressed up to that point.
5. **Give reasons** for your thoughts and ideas that do not imply judgment or rejection of others ideas.
6. **Balance advocacy and inquiry.** You are not neutral, since you have your own ideas and reasons for holding them. But ask questions about the reasons that others give for holding their ideas in such a way as to enhance the common understanding of the issues.
7. **Make time for collective reflection.** Don't jump to action unless absolutely necessary. Encourage time to reflect on the shared conversation before committing to anything.

13 Steps to Better Active Listening (Grohol):

Even doing 3 or 4 of the following will help a lot.

1. **Restating.** Paraphrase in your own words. Shows respectful listening and helps you understand (e.g., "Let's see if I'm clear about this...").
2. **Summarizing.** Bring together several facts and/or points to check your understanding of how the speaker sees them as fitting together.
3. **Encouraging.** Brief expressions that show you are listening and which invite further elaboration (e.g., "Oh?" "I understand." "Then?" "And?")

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4. **Reflecting.** Make occasional statements that show you understand the significance of what the speaker is saying (e.g., “This sounds very important to you...” “That’s something few people realize...or see...or appreciate...”).
5. **Giving feedback.** Let the speaker know your thoughts. Share observations, information, insights and experiences. Then listen.
6. **Labelling emotions.** Naming feelings helps people see things more objectively (e.g., I sense you are feeling frustrated, worried, anxious...”).
7. **Probing.** Ask questions that encourage the speaker to give more detailed and meaningful information (e.g., “What would happen if...?” “Have you considered...?”).
8. **Validating.** Acknowledge that you consider their contributions to the conversation to be valuable and their problems, issues and feelings legitimate. Listen with empathy and respond in a way that shows interest (e.g., I appreciate your willingness to...”).
9. **Pause strategically.** Pause at key points in the conversation. This signals something important is taking place, or about to.
10. **Use silence strategically.** Allow for comfortable silences. They give time to reflect and can be useful in defusing a tense exchange.
11. **Use “I” statements occasionally** to indicate that you are personally invested in the conversation, not just a passive observer who is indifferent to what is being said (e.g., “I know you have a lot to say on this issue, but I need to...”).
12. **Redirect to de-escalate tension.** Switch the topic if someone is becoming overly aggressive, agitated or angry.
13. **Discuss consequences.** Invite reflection of the possible consequences of action or inaction.

7 Communication Blockers (Grohol)

1. **Interrupting.** It’s disrespectful and shows you aren’t interested in what the speaker is saying.
2. **“Why” questions.** They make people defensive. See The Art of Questioning above for suggested alternatives.
3. **Quick reassurance;** saying things like, “Don’t worry about that.” It is dismissive—it says you don’t think what the speaker is saying is not important or they are mistaken for taking it seriously.
4. **Giving advice.** It shows insensitivity and makes the person potentially feel stupid, as though there is a simple answer that you know after only a few minutes of listening that they didn’t think of. Most issues are more complex than that. Try instead to help them explore possibilities so they can pick one for themselves.
5. **Being too persistent;** digging for information and forcing someone to talk about something they would rather not talk about. If people are hesitant, back off and ask open-ended, indirect questions that they can easily respond to without revealing more personal information than they are comfortable with. If they keep things superficial, take that as an indicator that it’s time to move on to a new topic.

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6. **Patronizing statements.** “I know just how you feel.” This is usually offered as a genuine expression of empathy, but it is unlikely that you know exactly how they feel, and it is taken as a trivialization of their issue.
7. **Preaching.** “You should. . .” Or, “You shouldn’t. . .” You don’t want to appear to be a know-it-all even if you think you do, in fact, think you know it all. People resent such an attitude.

Things to Keep in Mind as You Teach Listening Skills

Critical dialogue pays attention to personal bias, especially with respect to power and privilege. Collectively examine mutually held personal biases, assumptions and biases that may be too easily overlooked in personal reflection alone.

Critical dialogue requires: 1) awareness of the ways personal biases can influence thinking; 2) understanding that language as a tool for learning rather than only expression of ideas (in stating and restating others’ and our own ideas, we refine our understanding of them); and 3) specific skills in speaking and listening in order to promote mutual learning. (Marchel, 2)

Students may quickly get caught up in problem solving and forget they must constantly question the source of their ideas (Marchel, pp. 4-8).

1. Define the Process
 - a. State (or better yet, negotiate with students) the purpose of the activity (e.g., to examine biases and assumptions, question on what evidence they are based, all as part of recognizing the importance of looking beneath the surface as a way of connecting ideas in dialogue).
 - b. State (or better yet, negotiate with students) the role of group discussion (e.g., to challenge assumptions and biases too easily overlooked in personal reflection alone).
 - c. Make students aware of the [Stages of Intellectual Development](#) (as road map, even if they don’t get it right now).
2. Stumbling Blocks
 - a. Point out the blinders of assumption: what are the things we are asserting based upon, and how valid (based on reason and evidence) are they? (Ultimately we have to question “reason” as a social construct and critique the subjective elements in “evidence”, but that’s something people come to with experience, along with devising ways of dealing with it.)
 - b. Note the fallacy of intuition. Intuitions are strongly felt but often ignore context. They may improve with experience, but initially intuition may be based on false assumptions that need to be explored.
 - c. Keep in mind North American assertiveness. North Americans are constantly encouraged to talk and give their opinion, but without listening and asking clarifying questions, this can be counterproductive to understanding. We need to learn how to

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listen carefully to others and use language to connect what we want to say to what they are saying, not just give our opinion (see also Glaser, below).

- d. Avoid the rush to give advice. This is deeply engrained. Make sure you really understand all the underlying issues first, and consider whether you know them sufficiently deeply that telling others what to do would not be considered insulting.

With respect to North American assertiveness, item c in Stumbling Blocks above, Western cultures value “hard” thinking (certainty, closure, control) and dismiss speculative, metaphoric and ambiguous thinking. Dialogic listening tries to tap into the more productively creative approach of the “softer” thinking style (Glaser):

- Encourage parties to say more, to further explore and explain their views and ask clarifying questions. You are looking for greater clarity and detail.
- Use, share and extend metaphors. This approach taps the productive creativity of the softer style of thinking and can reveal or generate new perspectives.
- Paraphrase—restate the other’s views in your own words, to the satisfaction of those others, to confirm your understanding of them. The paraphrasing helps us interpret and respond to others’ views. The goal is to keep the focus on the flowing conversation.
- Encourage students to explore the context of each other's claims—the circumstances and desires around ideas, convictions and opinions. The goal is to facilitate shared understanding.

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