



# The Dialogue Process: Codes and Questions - "But Why?"

**Overview:** Dialogue processes – focused on critical thinking and problem-solving and grounded in values of equality, solidarity and the common good – are crucial aspects of social justice and movement-building work. Facilitation of these consciousness-raising processes require a range of skills that include the ability to: form safe, inspiring climates of trust and solidarity, develop compelling and creative ways to generate discussion and analysis, and master the art of questioning to probe beyond the surface and encourage deeper awareness, connection, reflection and action.

**Purpose:** This activity helps people become acquainted with key aspects of the dialogue process and practice some of them in a workshop setting. It starts with the idea and development of codes – representations of people’s reality – vital tools for generating dialogues that promote critical awareness, analysis and action. By learning about and then practicing the questioning and problem-posing approach that accompanies a code, people get a taste of what it means to be a good facilitator and political organizer. They gain an appreciation of how dialogue processes encourage empowerment and political awareness but also collective knowledge production and more effective change strategies. As a feminist popular education approach, it builds on people’s wisdom and experience and affirms their integrity, connection and agency while challenging them to always question. It deepens their understanding of themselves, their community and world and provides the basis for a power analysis that makes visible the dynamics of patriarchy and other forms of oppression as well as possibilities for social transformation.

**Time:** 2.5 hours

**Materials and Space Needed:**

- Flip chart
- Newsprint
- Markers
- Masking tape





- Handouts:
  - Codes and questions for dialogue process
  - Instructions for exercise

**Credit:** Adapted by Valerie Miller and Lisa Veneklasen

**Process:**

**In plenary:**

- Introduce the purpose of the activity, providing a bit of overview and a quick description of the process, explaining that for this exercise they will divide into small groups and come up with a code on a deeply felt problem and then help facilitate a dialogue process with the larger group.
- For background, review an activity already carried out that illustrates the idea of a code and the dialogue process, for example, the spider web; ask about what they remember about the steps and process used to promote discussion. Summarize key points and emphasize how creating the web was a code and the set of questions a guide to help people deepen their understanding and analysis of a problem or issue.
- Review *Dialogue Process* document, respond to any questions.

*Note: The following ideas will help you focus the discussion and provide some useful background and specific pointers for the presentation. See the handout for more details.*

- *To review this information with the group, it's probably most effective if you present a simple power point or flip chart summary based on the handout highlighting the key ideas and steps, allotting time for Q and A and then providing the complete handout document as back up material.*
- *It's helpful to emphasize that the first two steps of the dialogue/question process are focused on the code – on describing and analyzing what participants see in the code – that, as facilitator, you only elicit information that explains what is happening and why participants think it is happening, in other words what the problem looks like and why it exists. You need to be aware that participants may know a lot about certain aspects of the problem and will want to jump to solutions right away but often the problem is not correctly understood or there is no collective understanding shared by everyone. Although participants may be knowledgeable about the issue, facilitators often need to provide additional information to deepen understanding and context.*



- *By starting with the general representation of reality --the code itself, -- people can develop a deeper and shared understanding as well as new perspectives and insights. This can then enrich the next step when they bring in their own lived experiences to the analysis.*
- *Some educators refer to this dialogue and problem-posing process as the “but why?” method. The facilitator’s questions encourage learners to ask what their situation looks like and why problems exist in order to probe the social, economic, cultural, political and historical roots of injustice. As this questioning evolves over time (beyond one single workshop!), facilitators provide additional information, ideas, terms and analytical frameworks that help people name power dynamics and develop more effective action strategies.*
- Review and pass out instructions for exercise (See handouts)

**Small group work:** (30 – 40 minutes)

1. Decide on a critical issue or problem that people are experiencing which will be then represented through a code – in this instance in the form of a skit
2. Develop a short skit (no more than 3 minutes) in which the problem is presented. The skit should not include any analysis of the problem; it is merely a representation of the problem as experienced by people.
3. Plan and practice how to carry out the dialogue facilitation process with the participants in the larger group – steps 1-5 (step 6 is critical but it is only relevant for a group that plans to take action). Decide who will facilitate and when (make sure everyone has a role). Choose one point in the dialogue process to share additional information to deepen the thinking of the group about the problem (at step 3 or 5). Twenty minutes is allotted for the whole presentation – skit (3 minutes) and dialogue (rest of time). Remember the most important aspect of the exercise is the dialogue process.

**In plenary:**

- Small groups present skits and facilitate dialogue process.
  - Ask those who facilitated the dialogue: What was it like being a facilitator? How did you feel? How do you assess the dialogue that you generated?
  - Provide several comments about the presentation and feedback on the facilitation – emphasizing how challenging it is to be an effective facilitator, how this is probably their first opportunity to apply this approach, then noting areas that were effective and those that will need more practice.



- Wrap up:
  - Ask for any final observations or comments about the experience.
  - Summarize relevant points from group, clarifying any major misunderstandings and highlighting:
    - How the process is most useful if the issue or problem resonates deeply in the group, one that people will be willing to take action on. Often the issue at the 'surface' is not the one felt most deeply.
    - How this process of questioning and critical thinking is a lifelong endeavor, one that:
      - Develops a sense of solidarity, agency and a critical awareness and consciousness about how power operates in their lives and the world
      - Helps promote people's creative problem-solving skills and their courage to ask why and to act and when they can't ask why or act, helping them to create safe spaces and security mechanisms to allow them to do so both individually and collectively.
    - How the role of facilitator and organizer is crucial to people's individual development and empowerment and to our overall movement building and change strategies.

*Note: Following this discussion, you may want to begin a discussion on the qualities and skills of a facilitator/political organizer.*



## Handout

### INSTRUCTIONS: Dialogue Process and Facilitation Small Group Work

#### Small group work: (30 – 40 minutes)

- Decide on a critical issue or problem that people are experiencing which will be then represented through a code – in this instance in the form of a skit.
- Develop a short skit (no more than 3 minutes) in which the problem is presented. The skit should not include any analysis of the problem; it is merely a representation of the problem as experienced by people.
- Plan and practice how to carry out the dialogue facilitation process with the participants in the larger group – steps 1 to 5 (step 6 is critical but it is only relevant for a group that is ready to take action). Decide who will facilitate and when (make sure everyone has a role). Choose one point in the dialogue process to share additional information to deepen the thinking of the group about the problem (at step 3 or 5). Twenty minutes is allotted for the whole presentation – skit (3 minutes) and dialogue (rest of time). Remember the most important aspect of the exercise is the dialogue process.



## DIALOGUE PROCESS: Codes and Questions

### Codes: A way to generate dialogue

A “code” can be a drawing, photograph, role play, game, skit, song, or story that presents a deeply-felt problem in a concrete way without providing explanations, answers, or morals. It depicts a problem situation as a way to generate dialogue and analysis, promoting critical thinking, problem-solving and the courage to question. A code is especially helpful for dealing with personally sensitive problems such as rape, domestic violence or HIV/AIDS where it may be difficult for people to discuss their own situation because of stigma and shame. Whatever the problem, it helps people stand back from a difficult situation, look at it from different perspectives and ask why it happens and what can be done about it. The development of a suitable code by an outside educator requires observation and consultation in order to frame it in a way that represents how people really experience it. Often, people affected by the problem themselves are the best code-creators. They can be asked to invent a skit or role play to illustrate a problem on the spot. This can get people directly involved from the beginning and brings the heart and often, humor, into the process immediately.

### Discussing Codes: Steps in the Dialogue Process

The steps listed below can help facilitators guide dialogue around codes, providing a set of questions for generating discussion and analysis. They do not always follow a predictable sequence. Rather, the facilitator is responsible for guiding the spiraling process that takes people from the personal to the concrete to the abstract and back again, and from connection to description to analysis to action. Besides posing questions, facilitators need to take a bit of time at the end of each step in order to briefly summarize the points made by the group.

The steps are rather straightforward, starting with an initial step to build trust in the group followed by a set of questions that helps facilitate a critical analysis and dialogue process.

Introductory step:

- Create a safe, supportive space.

Dialogue process:

- What is happening?
- Why is this happening?
- Does this happen in your community? In your life?
- What problems does this situation lead to?
- What are the principal root causes of these problems?
- How might we solve them? What do we need to do?



## Introductory step: Solidarity and Safe Space

Dialogue requires confidence, ease and trust-building between people. If participants have not developed a sense of group solidarity, encourage them to introduce themselves and get to know each other. Responding to questions like “What inspires me?” or “What are my hopes for myself, my family, my community?” or “One thing that changed me forever!” can affirm the importance of everyone’s contribution and begin to build connections. The idea of beginning the dialogue process with personal affirmation was added to Freire’s original methodology by activists working with women. This is an important introductory step because the personal is at the core of our values and self-esteem, and is central to the way we learn and interact with the world. Creating a safe space allows people to feel affirmed but also to be open to questions about their own assumptions and ideas in a dialogue process that is the foundation for critical thinking and problem-solving.

## Dialogue process:

### Step 1: *What is happening?*

- Present a code to generate the dialogue or facilitate a process for developing a code where you ask participants to create their own code – for example, a skit or drawing - about a problem or issue they face. The group then presents their code -- acts out the skit or tells a story.

Once the code is presented the dialogue process begins. Then, as a facilitator you encourage participants to carefully describe what is happening in the story, drawing or skit –something that may be a daily occurrence for them. Often more formally educated people use shorthand terminology to describe situations, such as “gender violence” or “conflict” or “immigration rights.” You should discourage such abstract language at this point and instead solicit concrete descriptions of what is happening. “Patrick is hitting Julia; she is holding out her arms to protect her children; or the head of the organization is bullying her colleagues and not letting anyone speak.” By presenting a concrete scene from real life, people can talk about the specific details of injustice and conflict as they experience them. Often, performing a skit to illustrate a situation is the most effective way for people to reflect on the complex details of inequality, discrimination, and sexual violence that permeate their lives. In this step, people begin to recognize how much they have in common and to link their own individual problems to those of others, an important step in forging political solidarity and raising political awareness.



**Step 2: First Analysis—Why is this happening?**

In your facilitator role, you begin to ask why people are doing what they are doing in the picture or skit, or simply, why this particular problem exists. Keep asking why so that participants question as well as describe. A skit or story can be especially helpful because people may feel more comfortable probing a situation that is slightly removed from their own lives. It is useful for the facilitator to know enough about the issue to be able to formulate questions that help people analyze and challenge myths, stereotypes, prejudices, etc. This is the beginning of the analysis process and is sometimes known as ‘but why’ since you want to probe beyond surface responses into the many layers of why something is occurring. *But why is this happening? But why? Why else do you think it is happening?*

**Step 3: Real Life Comparison—Does this happen in your community? In your life? How?**

Encourage people to give examples of how the situation described happens in their lives so that they can feel and think more deeply about it. Often, this step in the process unearths anger or other negative emotions that can be challenging but also can be constructive for the learning process.

*Note: As a facilitator, you must be prepared to deal with deep emotions that could emerge from this discussion. For more information on how to deal with deep emotions and to access exercises for relaxation, please refer to our “HMB/Integral Protection: Risk, Security and Self-Care” pack.*

**Step 4: Related Problems—What other problems does this lead to?**

This step looks at the consequences of the problem. Again in this step, you can provide additional information to supplement what participants contribute to offer a broader analysis.

**Step 5: Deeper Analysis—What are the root causes of these problems?**

This step encourages people to probe more deeply into the roots causes shaping a problem. Why does this happen? Again the question *but why is this happening* is helpful in probing the causes. It’s critical at this stage to look at how power and interests shape the visible structures of society as well as the unseen processes of socialization and ideology. In exploring these power dynamics, we question how each of us has internalized certain beliefs that can perpetuate a problem and conversely, how we resist them. Once people have had sufficient time, you can expand with additional information and challenge simplistic explanations and prejudices. For example, here you can introduce analytical frameworks and exercises that underscore how different forms of power and patriarchy operate on our bodies, intellect and emotions and in our private and public relationships.





### **Step 6: Alternatives and Action—*What can we do about it?***

Linking dialogue and learning to action is essential for empowerment and social change. How will people use their new knowledge to alter their situation? In this step, you or others may need to provide more information about alternatives and strategies that will assist people in defining what they can do – for example, about policies, law reform, budgets, basic rights and other possible actions such as leadership development, consciousness-raising and movement-building opportunities. This moment in the process taps people’s own experiences of resistance and action to build collective responses and strategies: “What can we do to address this problem here in our community? What are the ways we can better organize, overcome sexist beliefs and myths, and develop strong, collaborative leadership and movements? What are the political, policy and institutional strategies to begin getting the resources or rights the system should provide?” Local solutions, such as setting up community meetings, seeking leadership training for members, or monitoring which schools have books and toilets are important pieces of larger solutions at the national or international levels. This step can serve as an initial brainstorming for a group that then can lead to further analysis, organizing and sustained political action.