

Dialogue Blocker Activity

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| <p>Overview</p> | <p>This activity is designed to help students recognize common dialogue blockers, why people use them, and to become more aware of how they inhibit important conversations. If the instructor chooses, this activity can also be used to construct a list of discussion ground rules for the class to agree to follow.</p> <p>If you are unfamiliar with the concept of “Dialogue Blockers” the resource guide, Responding to Common Dialogue Blockers is a great place to start in order to ground yourself in the topic before implementing this activity.</p> |
| <p>Goals</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) To help students recognize common dialogue blockers and how they impact conversation both online and in the classroom. 2) To encourage introspection concerning why dialogue blockers are used. 3) To guide students in developing a list of ground rules that are supportive of thoughtful dialogue and inclusivity. |
| <p>Implementation</p> | <p>This activity can be implemented at any point in the semester. It is especially useful in the first few class periods as a tool for establishing dialogue norms that will support an inclusive learning community.</p> |
| <p>Challenges</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Students may feel defensive in this activity and may defend the use of dialogue blockers. 2) In the discussion of the reading, “Postmortem: A Conversation Gone Wrong,” they may exhibit hostility toward the Black Woman and protectiveness over the white participants. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. As the discussion facilitator, you may need to redirect the conversation. Some suggestions for how to do that are embedded in the discussion guide. b. You might also press students gently on their defensiveness or sympathy with the white participants in the reading. |
| <p>Materials</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Highlighters <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. 1 for every 2 students 2) Copies of or excerpts from: “Postmortem: A Conversation Gone Wrong” <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. 2 for each group 3) Copies of “Common Dialogue Blockers” |

Session Sequence

| Lesson Structure | Time <i>(Estimated amount of time for each component)</i> | Activity Content and Instructions |
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| Pre-Class Reading and Written Exercise | | <p>Have students read, “Post Mortem: A Conversation Gone Wrong” in advance of class. While the post is too long for them to read during class, you might choose to excerpt it for them and have them read or re-read selected passages during class time.</p> <p>You may need to bring to their attention that, in the transcript, the original conversation is in regular text, and the annotations providing commentary and analysis are in italics. Tell students that they will need to bring printed copies they can write on for the next class.</p> <p>Adding a written component, have students write a response in preparation for class in order to get the class started and to help them begin to process the piece. Some prompts may include:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) What was your initial reaction to, “Post Mortem: A Conversation Gone Wrong?” Did you feel defensive? Validated? Sympathetic? Were there specific passages that caused you to have a strong reaction? 2) Recall a time when you heard, saw, or took part in a similar conversation to the one transcribed in, “Post Mortem: A Conversation Gone Wrong.” How was it contextually similar or different? Why do you think the patterns we can observe in this conversation are so common? 3) The transcribed conversation is about White privilege, as is indicated by the original meme the commenters are responding to. Pick one moment why the conversation is diverted away from this primary topic (there are many to choose from). What is the conversation diverted to and how? What is the effect? Is this a strategy of topic-changing you’ve seen before? |
| Dialogue Blockers In-Class Activity | | |
| Introduction | 5 mins | <p>The instructor introduces the assignment with an overview of the lesson, introducing the concept of dialogue blockers and stating learning goals for the class period.</p> <p>Dialogue Blockers: Dialogue that functions rhetorically to silence a perspective or divert the conversation away from a critical insight. These are usually deployed as defensive responses to perspectives found uncomfortable or challenging.</p> |

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| Dialogue Blockers Overview | 10 mins | Project or hand out copies of, "Common Dialogue Blockers." Go through the blockers and the ways of responding to them. |
| Small Group Activity | 10 mins | <p>Have students divide into groups (the smaller the better)</p> <p>Pass out highlighters and two copies of the reading if students did not bring one.</p> <p>Explain to students:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Each group will be searching for common dialogue blockers in 'Post Mortem'. 2) Use a highlighter to mark where in the reading a dialogue blocker is used, writing in the margin which blocker it is. 3) If you find any dialogue blockers that do not correspond to the blockers listed on the sheet, mark those with a star. 4) Complete steps 1-3 on two copies of the reading as one will be turned in and the other used for discussion. Each group should have two scribes. 5) Optional: The group that finds the most blockers will get a low stakes prize, such as 1 extra credit point. 6) You have 10 minutes to find as many blockers as your group can. 7) Write your group members' names on top of the copy that you will be turning in. 8) After time is up, collect one copy from each group. |
| Large Group Review | 10 mins | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Project a copy of 'Post Mortem' on the overhead/from the computer. 2) Starting from the beginning of the article, ask students, "What is the first blocker you found?" <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Ask students to elaborate on how they determined which type of blocker it was if it is not immediately clear. <p>**Note: If the students identify the Black Woman's comments as conversation blockers, put pressure on that. Because the original conversation is about white privilege, her comments may be blocking the conversation the white men want to have, but contextually she is redirecting the conversation back to white privilege.</p> |

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| <p>Large Group Debrief</p> | <p>15 mins</p> | <p>Questions to consider:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Why were some of the speakers so resistant to talking about white privilege? What motivations are served by their blocking the conversation? 2) In what ways were some of the speakers resistant to the conversation being blocked? What strategies do they use to try to redirect the conversation back to white privilege? 3) What is the effect of the use of the dialogue blockers? |
| <p>Closing and Establishing Ground Rules</p> | <p>15 mins</p> | <p>Lead a whole-class discussion in developing ground rules for future class conversations pertaining to productive in-class conversations.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Explain: “These dialogue blockers occur all the time online, but they also occur in the classroom. Sometimes they are voiced, and sometimes we say them to ourselves as an excuse for checking-out of a challenging conversation. And just like in “Post Mortem,” dialogue blockers in the classroom inhibit the critical discussion of important issues. If we were to create a set of ground rules that would have helped this conversation and conversations like it go better, what would they be?” 2) Note on the board ground rules that students suggest. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. If their suggestions are focused on the “Post Mortem” piece, direct them to think about how conversations like this may play out in the classroom. b. For example: “I’ve found that when conversations like these play out verbally, people are often so quick to respond that I’m not sure they took time to think about what they were saying or why they felt so defensive. What kind of ground rules can you think of that might address that problem?” 3) When ground rules are established, let students know you will document the ground rules written on the board and will send out a copy to each student. <p>**Note: The students may want to create ground rules that address the comments of the Black Woman. Within reason, it is okay to recognize those rules as important. For example, in the classroom, “Preach it, White Dudes” would probably increase defensiveness and could result in an already difficult conversation becoming more difficult. Try to balance those rules with recognition of why the Black Woman responds the way she does. For example: “I think you might be right that her comment probably makes the white men feel attacked and defensive (though they were already defensive before she entered the conversation). Since she responds that way out of exhaustion and frustration with how often white men dismiss their privilege, can you think of a discussion ground rule that would help create conditions in which she wouldn’t have to take on this emotional weight?”</p> |