Responding to Common Dialogue Blockers

Overview	This resource is designed to help instructors manage the challenges of difficult classroom dialogue, specifically the way some students block or divert dialogue as a defensive response to perspectives they find uncomfortable or challenging. The "common blockers," authored by Kelly Obear of the Social Justice Training Institute, are listed below with explanations of how they act to block dialogue and suggested responses that you or your students can use to respond and restore dialogue effectively. The section on "Facilitator Considerations" gives further strategies for instructors to approach difficult classroom conversations.
Goals	1) To give concrete examples and explanations of rhetorical strategies that block dialogue, so students and instructors can better recognize when they or others are prone to use them. 2) To give examples of how to restore dialogue effectively, so students and instructors are better prepared to manage difficult conversations. 3) To provide instructors with strategies and considerations that will better equip them for tackling topics that may result in conflict.
Implementation	This list is best reviewed multiple times outside of the classroom, so you can become more comfortable with how you want to handle challenging discussions in class. Additionally, the "Common Blockers and Effective Responses" list can be shared with students at the beginning of the semester as a way to talk about discussion ground rules and your expectations for how they speak to one another in class.
Challenges	1) Although these responses and strategies are designed to decrease defensiveness and restore meaningful dialogue, difficult topics that touch on class, gender, race, sexuality, immigration, religion, and other similar topics are often the hardest for both instructors and students to manage, and you will need to be adaptive if a strategy fails. 2) You and your students will stumble, but the more practice you all have, the easier it will become to have meaningful dialogue.

Common Blockers and Effective Responses

The following list specifies common dialogue blockers that function rhetorically to silence a perspective or divert the conversation away from a critical insight. Each of these common dialogue blockers is followed by possible responses that redirect the conversation back to the perspective to which the blocker was responding.

Explain Always	Otherwise known as [Perfectly Logical Explanations](#), explain-always make appeals to the rationale and authority of dominant narratives as a way to side-step critique without necessarily addressing the key issues at stake. **Restore dialogue with:** 1) "That may be true; here's how I see it… or another way to view it is…" 2) "There may be a number of factors that contributed to this situation. Another one that *does* have to do with identity might be…" 3) "You could be right that this one specific time it had nothing to do with prejudice. It feels so similar to so many other times I've experienced/witnessed when this type of thing was rooted in discrimination… it's hard to know."
Yeah, but…	These blockers avoid engaging with the original perspective entirely, minimizing the importance of the insight the speaker voiced. **Restore dialogue with:** 1) "You may not have intended this. When you say "Yea, but", it can lead people to feel their perspective/ experience has been discounted." 2) "I'm curious what you were hoping to communicate with that statement."
That happens to me/my group, too	This blocker attempts to diminish the specificity of the original perspective by stripping it of context and representing it as a universal experience. For example, "Everyone has a hard time catching a cab in New York, so racism has nothing to do with it." **Restore dialogue with:** 1) "This dynamic/situation does happen to other groups, too. The difference might be *how often* it happens to them, and *why* it happens to them. For instance: most white people have received bad customer service. It rarely happens to them because of their race, and it probably doesn't happen to them as frequently." 2) "How does it feel when it happens to you? How often does that happen? Why does it happen to you? Thinking through these situations can help you empathize with someone who experiences this all the time because of identity."

I know someone who…and they don't agree with you…	By appealing to the authority of someone else, this type of blocker attempts to undermine the authority of the original speaker, or at the very least attempt to undermine the speaker's identification of a pattern by suggesting that outliers disprove that a pattern exists, reducing systemic issues such as racism to individual experiences. **Restore dialogue with:** 1) "There are likely people who don't agree with this. That doesn't mean this perspective is any less valid." 2) "Not all ___ feel the same. There may be people here who do agree and have had very similar experiences. Are you open to hearing more about these experiences?"
That doesn't happen to me… (so it doesn't exist)	Much like "I know someone who… and they don't agree with you," this blocker attempts to reduce broader issues to individual experiences. **Restore dialogue with:** 1) "I'm glad that it doesn't, and I hope you never do experience this. Unfortunately, this is what happened to __, and I've heard many other people describe all too similar experiences." 2) "It might not, and it could be so subtle that it's hard to even notice… here's what I've noticed in my life…"
I don't see it that way… (therefore, it doesn't really happen…)	Similar to the two blockers above, this blocker attempts to use individual perspective to undermine the recognition of broader observable patterns. It is often spoken by a person of considerable privilege who trusts that if racism, for example, were as big of a problem as the original speaker suggested, they would have known about it by now. **Restore dialogue with:** 1) "You might not have ever recognized this dynamic before or seen it happen. I can remember when I did not know about this dynamic. After witnessing it happen so many times and not being able to find any other explanation, I now believe that there most often is some prejudice underneath this type of reaction."
Don't you think that…	This blocker avoids directly communicating one's perspective by putting pressure on the original speaker. It is often used in the spirit of "playing devil's advocate" or an attempt to make the original speaker stumble on their own position without adopting any risk associated with directly communicating their own position. **Restore dialogue with:** 1) "I'm wondering if you have a statement/perspective behind your question…" 2) "Do you have a specific example that illustrates what you're trying to ask or say?" 3) "I'm curious what *you* think about that…"

You're overreacting… you're too sensitive	This type of blocker is a form of gas-lighting, suggesting that a speaker's emotions have no rational basis. It suggests that the problem isn't with the thing that caused the offense but with the person who was offended. **Restore dialogue with:** 1) "You may not agree; some people feel very strongly about this. And it is important to respect them enough to acknowledge their perspective." 2) "Your intent might be to try to help or support; the impact of that statement is…"
They are a good person… they never meant to do that…	This appeal to the character of the person whom the original speaker is critiquing emerges from a defensive belief that a critique of someone's behavior is a disparagement of their character and that intent matters more than impact. **Restore dialogue with:** 1) "Many 'good people' do hurtful and harmful things. Regardless of the intent, this was the impact of their actions…" 2) "I didn't hear that they were questioning if they're good or bad; I think they are talking about the impact of their actions."
That had nothing to do with (an "ism")! It's just their personality!	Another appeal to character, this blocker functions similarly to the two blockers above. It suggests that no harm was intended, and the person critiquing the behavior is being oversensitive to a person who is just old fashioned, aggressive, a flirt, or particularly brash, etc. **Restore dialogue with:** 1) "That is a very valid perspective. I have observed/experienced this type of situation many times and have come to see it differently. Here's the way I see it…"
That was not my intent! You misunderstood me!	While misunderstandings happen, and it is reasonable to want to have the chance to clarify intent, this blocker, like the one above, turns the attention away from the impact of what was said or done to the intent behind what was said or done. It can also quickly turn into claims of victimization where the harm done by "misunderstanding" is seen as outweighing the harmful impact of the supposedly misunderstood comment or action. **Restore dialogue with:** 1) "We are very open to hearing your intent; first, I hope you can acknowledge the impact of your comment/actions." 2) "What was your intent? I hear your intent was…, and I hope you can also realize the impact was different than what you intended."

Facilitator Considerations	In addition to using the above examples to recognize when dialogue is being blocked and to restore dialogue, there are several strategies and considerations that will help instructors manage difficult dialogues in the classroom:
	
	1) **Turn it to the Group:**
	    a. With many of these, a facilitator can ask the group to respond. Examples: What do you all think about this? Who agrees/disagrees?
	
	2) **Panning – Name it and Frame it:**
	    a. Identify trends in the group's behavior and name them. Example: I noticed many people's postures changed when that last comment was shared. Why?
	
	3) **Refer to Group Guidelines:**
	    a. If your group created guidelines (a.k.a. agreements, ground rules) earlier, these are great to refer to. Example: I wonder if we could refer to our guidelines and remember to… when we speak with each other.
	
	4) **Not Speaking for Participants:**
	    a. When trying to avoid having a participant put on the spot, we can sometimes speak for them. Although this often results in them not having to engage in an uncomfortable situation, we can sometimes make false assumptions of the participant's perspective or simplify the issue to only being about that one person. Instead, refer to other considerations on this list for ideas.
	
	5) **Use "I Statements":**
	    a. As a facilitator, we can sometimes forget the power of using our own perspective. By using "I statements," we can offer our own experiences, adding needed depth or breadth to the existing conversation.
	
	6) **Be Aware of Your Hot Buttons:**
	    a. Being aware of your hot buttons (a.k.a. triggers) and how they may show in your non-verbal cues, will help you avoid unintended impacts. Additionally, it is important to be aware of how any positive emotional reactions may show in your non-verbal cues for related reasons.
	
	7) **Strive for multipartiality:**
	    a. Try to notice dominant narratives that may arise in the conversation and aim to create an environment where everyone feels safe and included in the deeper exploration of them. Introduce counter-narratives as relevant, either through sharing your own experience or asking the group members to share/consider alternate perspectives.
	
	8) **Tone Matters:**
	    a. Said in different tones, any one of these facilitator responses can sound either supportive and challenging or belittling and punitive. It is important to be aware that tone matters and challenge participants in a way that keeps them engaged and not defensive.

	9) **Change up the Structure:**
	a. Sometimes if a group has been having full-group conversations for a while and challenging participant comments have made it tense/uneasy, it is best to break into pair/triad conversations in order to release some of the tension from the group.
Citations	List of 'Common Blockers' authored by Kathy Obear of the Social Justice Training Institute. Related Facilitator questions adapted by robbie routenberg of InciteChange! Consulting.