

The Network for Peace through Dialogue
in cooperation with **Marymount Manhattan College**

Presents

Dialogue In/As Action
Complete. Don't Compete!
A New Approach to Dialoguing with Conflict



[Presented by East Side Institute](#)

After introductions, the two presenters from the East Side Institute encouraged all participants to pay attention to the use of language and the new ways that language could be used to communicate as they led us in some experiential activities. In all their work, they use improv techniques which are built on “always accepting offers” because for improv to work, each participant must build on and accept whatever the previous person has said without judgment. This helps open up participants to other ways of thinking and other people’s perspectives.

The first warm up activity was called “Sound Ball”. The presenters explained that the purpose of this activity was to build trust among the participants to help set the foundation for dialogue. For this activity, one person made a noise and gesture and then passed the sound ball to another person in the group who accepted the ball by catching and copying the movement and sound before sending a new sound ball of her own out to a new person. During the activity, we were instructed to maintain eye contact and to really engage with each other. After the throwing the imaginary sound ball for awhile, we had to add on more body movements and instead of passing the ball, we had to come into the center of the circle and mimic each other’s movement and actions. During the activity, there was a great deal of laughter and engagement between the group members.

After this warm up activity, the presenters led us in a second warm up where we had to line up in alphabetical order by first name without speaking at all. Although there was some initial disbelief at how we could accomplish this, we were able to line up in less than two minutes using lots of non-verbal communication like hand gestures and facial expressions.

The next activity was called “Yes and” and involved creating a collective story. Each participant would tell a line in the story by beginning with “yes and” before adding another sentence to the story. We were given several guiding principles which were that improv is a tool that helps us to understand that although life has many possibilities; we often live it as if it is very scripted with only one or two options. By opening ourselves up to different ways that situations can unfold, then we open ourselves up to the idea that there are many truths and not just our own version of truth. We were also instructed not to negate what the person before us has offered as part of the story and to work on making the ensemble look good instead of trying to make our own part stand out. After collectively telling a story that involved swimming in purple color on the moon, we debriefed the activity. We discussed that since the story constantly changed direction person to person, it was impossible to rehearse your part in advance which forced you to really listen to each person. This really enhanced both each person’s listening skills as well as their visual mind which we often don’t use in normal conversations. The story sparked people’s imagination and helped each of us use our individuality for a common good. We discussed how play and creativity often tap into parts of us that we don’t use in our day to day lives and help us to relate to each other in new ways versus on our projected ideas or stereotypes. This can help groups that are normally in conflict be more open to relating in new ways. The presenters use activities like this in dialogues with groups like teens and police officers who may go into the meeting having lots of negative preconceived notions about each other that would make dialogue that was just based on talking to each other very challenging.

The next improve activity involved the participants lining up and one of the presenters giving one person at a time the same line to which each person had to respond. The presenter would say “That’s not how I would do it” and each participant had to respond with the first thing that came into their mind. We went through the activity twice and then debriefed. The presenters helped us to see that although we gave lots of responses they basically fell into two categories – either positive responses that encouraged the presenter to try new ways or negative responses that rebuffed her statement. We

discussed how hard it is to think out of the box and break out of the good and bad scripts that we all have in our minds. The discussion was really about how the scripts that we have been given about life limit us from really being open to the multiple truths that may be true for someone else especially someone different from us with whom we may be in conflict.

We did a final activity where we broke into groups and came up with a historical figure. Then each group had to designate someone to act out that figure taking a bus trip with the other historical figures. We had Barak Obama, Hitler and two Eleanor Roosevelts on the bus. After this activity which again resulted in lots of laughter and interaction, we discussed that although we normally use language for practical purposes, like buying a cup of coffee, that language also has the power to help make meaning. In using improv techniques and playful activities with groups and individuals in conflict, there is the possibility of creating new shared meanings that can help build trust and relationships which are the foundation for dialogue.