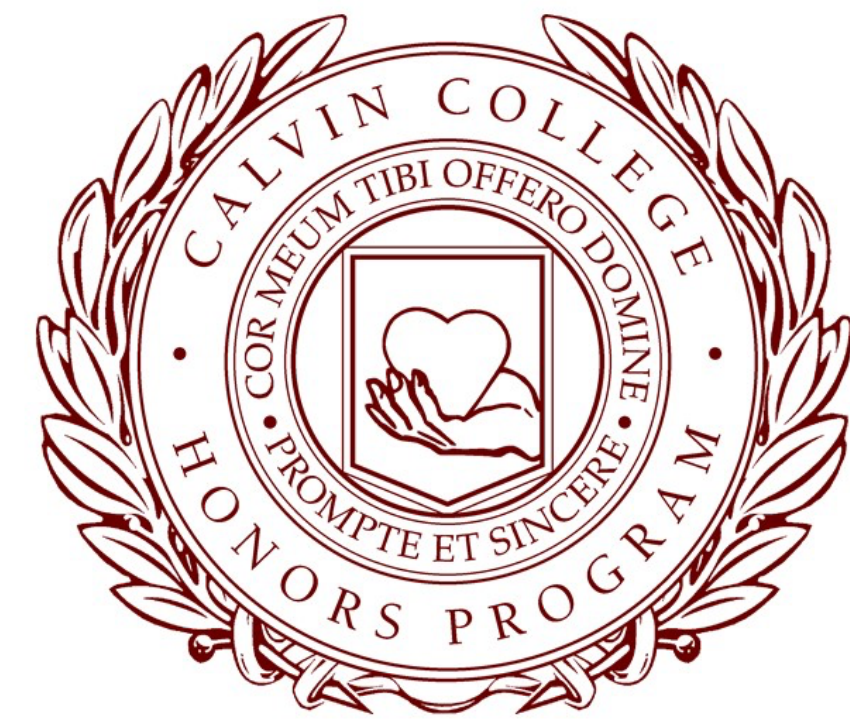# Facilitating and Navigating Tension: A Qualitative Study in the Dialectics that Animate Dialogue

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Project Thesis

I argue that dialectics–ever-present unified opposites that create tension (good and bad) in communication–and dialogue are deeply connected, though often thought of separately; further, handbooks inadvertently train facilitators to identify the animating dialectics and navigate them effectively in order to create the environment for successful dialogue.

Background

This study explores how dialogue programs teach facilitators to navigate the dialectic tensions that animate the practice of dialogue. The study analyzes facilitation handbooks from prominent dialogue organizations and scholars, to understand how they frame dialectical tensions when training facilitators. This study contributes a fresh look at the intersection of dialectics and dialogue, reframing the interpersonal focus of the current literature on dialectics to focus on group dialectics and their navigation in dialogue.

Research Question

How do dialogue handbooks teach facilitators to navigate the dialectics that animate dialogue?

Methodology

In this study, I analyzed six dialogue handbooks chosen for their prominence and focus on conflict transformation. I identified and coded the tensions anticipated by the handbooks and the subsequent suggestions as to how the facilitator could navigate it. The handbooks I analyzed were:

1. *Fostering Dialogue Across Divides: A Nuts and Bolts Guide* from the Public Conversations Project
2. *Basics of Dialogue Facilitation* from The Berghof Foundation
3. *The Dialogue Handbook* by Helde
4. *A Guide for Training Public Dialogue Facilitators*, an Everyday Democracy Project
5. *Dialogue in Public Engagement: a Handbook*, a Beacons for Public Engagement an Edinburgh Beltane project
6. *Dialogue Guide: Facilitator Handbook*, an Idea Partnership project

Key Findings

Dialectic:	Description:	How Handbooks Frame Dialectics:	How Handbooks Navigate Tension:	Key Ideas:
Commonality — Difference	This dialectic addresses the diversity of perspectives and people, seeking unity and common understanding while also recognizing different perspectives and experiences.	This dialectic does not ask someone to forfeit their convictions for the sake of unity, but rather, that people learn how to navigate and manage the differences in a diverse world.	- Facilitators seek to unite a diverse group of people through mutual goals, mutual understanding, and mutual recognition of the value of each other and their perspectives. - Encourage participants to share perspectives through stories of their experiences	Multivocality Experience Mutuality Representation Unity Stories
Strategic Preparation — Organic Response	This dialectic refers to the careful creation and use of structure and norms with the intention of creating a space that enables organic, emergent dialogue	"[S]tructures restrain in the service of liberation...They block old patterns, creating space for new ways of being together."	- Created guiding principles for dialogue - Strategic room set-up to promote conversation - Begin with structured activities that encourage organic response (ex. going around the circle to talk) - Decrease structure with increase in openness and trust	Principles Accountability Openness Flexibility Authenticity Trust
Self — Other	This dialectic addresses the recognition of one's own humanity as well as that of others, fostering mutual respect and understanding	"Embedded in our basic dialogical values is the belief that we must respect other people's various views, because we are equal in worth"	- Promoted facilitated practices that encouraged participants to look outside themselves (ex. Norms like "seek first to understand then to be understood")	Respect Inclusivity Equality Mutual Understanding
Conviction — Curiosity	This dialectic relates to how tightly participants hold to their views and how open they are to those of others.	"[B]eing honest about what you represent and being open to what the other suggests. You are open to understand the other's views and what underlies them, without necessarily having to accept them or agree with them"	- Encouraged facilitators to shape the dialogic environment to encourage sharing - Activities to discuss the ideas openly and honestly once they are on the table - Model curious rather than critical listening	Openness Honesty Curiosity Active Listening Suspension of Judgment Trust