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## Bridging Differences through Dialogue

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Building bridges between people from different social backgrounds becomes increasingly important as our society becomes more diverse and stratified. One way we can foster learning and understanding across differences is to bring college students together to talk and learn from each other, to find ways to communicate, and to understand why it is not always easy to get along or to identify common ground. . . . This essay describes one promising approach for meeting this challenge, intergroup dialogue.

Intergroup dialogue is a face-to-face facilitated conversation between members of two or more social identity groups that strives to create new levels of understanding, relating, and action. The term social identity group refers to group affiliation based on a common status or history in society resulting from socially constructed group distinctions. Examples of groups that have participated in intergroup dialogues on college campuses include men and women; white people, biracial/multiracial people, and people of color; blacks, Latinos and Native Americans; lesbians, gay men, bisexual, and heterosexual people; people from working-, middle-, and upper-class socioeconomic backgrounds; and Christians, Muslims, and Jews. . . .

Intergroup dialogues encourage direct encounter and exchange about contentious issues, especially those associated with issues of social identity and social stratification. They invite students to actively explore the meanings of singular (as men or as women) or intersecting (as men of color or as white women) social identities and to examine the dynamics of privilege and oppression that shape relationships between social groups in our society. In addition, the dialogues build dispositions and skills for developing and maintaining relationships across differences and for taking action for equity and social justice.

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Dialogue groups are co-led by trained facilitators who belong to the participating social identity groups. For example, a white student and a student of color would cofacilitate a cross-race dialogue. The programming strategies used to supervise and train dialogue facilitators vary across campuses. In some institutions, undergraduate students lead the groups after undergoing intensive training. In others, dialogue facilitators are professionals from counseling centers, student activities departments, human relations programs, or intergroup relations programs; or they are graduate students who have received specialized training in counseling, college student development, or social justice education as part of their programs of study. Regardless of the strategies used to train or supervise them, facilitators are expected to lead the dialogue process and to intervene when necessary. As discussed in a book chapter by Ruby Beale, Monita Thompson, and Mark Chesler entitled “Training Peer Facilitators for Intergroup Dialogue Leadership,” efforts to prepare and support facilitators include the development of competencies in at least two areas: (1) knowledge and awareness about one’s own and others’ social identities and histories, and (2) small-group leadership skills, including the ability to lead difficult conversations and constructively explore conflicting needs or “hot” issues. A curricular guide and discussion questions to stimulate dialogue and reflection usually support the work of facilitators and student participants. . . .

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## WHAT IS THE INTERGROUP DIALOGUE APPROACH?

The intergroup dialogue approach combines experiential learning and dialogic bridge-building methods with critical analysis of socially constructed group differences and the systems of stratification that give rise to intergroup conflicts and social injustice. It explores the causes and effects of group differences through a social justice lens and draws from multidisciplinary perspectives on social identity groups, systems of inequality, and intergroup relations. This approach starts with the proposition that meaningful dialogue and learning across race and other social group boundaries requires an educational practice that intentionally builds upon three interconnected pedagogical processes: sustained communication, critical social awareness, and bridge building. . . .

**Sustained Communication.** Sustained face-to-face conversations encourage listening and questioning across lines of difference, which in turn fosters mutual understanding of similar and conflicting needs and perspectives. Such communication must be continued over an extended period to allow for the development of reciprocal, active, and committed communication. Dialogic methods and techniques such as the ones described by Helen Fox in *When Race Breaks Out* and Stephen Brookfield and Stephen Preskill in *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms* are helpful to support the development of dispositions and skills that enable participants to listen attentively to each other, talk openly and honestly, appreciate different perspectives, and ask “dumb” or “politically incorrect” questions.

For example, modeling techniques that demonstrate “sensitive intercultural interaction” or methods such as “paired listening,” “talking circles,” “fishbowls,” “circle of voices,” and more can encourage authentic voicing, and listening from the very beginning of a dialogue group. As facilitators encourage participants to ask questions and probe deeper, participants begin to take more risks and challenge each other’s views more directly. In a white-biracial—multiracial—people of color dialogue, for example, the facilitators may decide to show a short segment from a film by Frances Reid entitled *Skin Deep* to encourage conversation about contentious issues related to race and racism on campus. After a short “free-write” to allow for personal time for thinking and feeling, the facilitators may structure a listening circle to encourage everyone to participate, and then ask, “What about this video feels familiar or surprising to you?” After everyone has responded, the facilitators may invite students to acknowledge what they heard, raise questions, and make comments. For example, after viewing a film like *Skin Deep*, questions about related issues will likely emerge, such as “special-interest floors in the residence halls,” “the school’s new affirmative action policy,” or “examples of white privilege on campus.” As David Schoem and his associates note in *Intergroup Dialogue: Deliberative Democracy in School, College, Community and Workplace*, trust in this type of group process only grows and is tested as students feel more free and confident to probe issues, challenge themselves and others, express anger, offer support, and raise difficult or controversial questions.

**Critical Social Awareness.** Spotlighting the political realities that lead to group differences can stimulate thoughtful conversations across race and other social group boundaries. Dialogue participants must develop both a shared vocabulary and a way to pinpoint the origins and impacts of group differences at the personal, interpersonal, and systemic level. The intergroup dialogue process allows participants to recognize, question, and analyze prevailing beliefs and behaviors that maintain systems of stratification and perpetuate estranged and oppressive relations between groups.

Active learning methods, such as the ones described in a book chapter by Ellen Junn entitled “Experiential Approaches to Enhancing Cultural Awareness” and in the selections

in *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice*, edited by Maurianne Adams, Lee Bell, and Pat Griffin, can gradually encourage intergroup dialogue participants to grapple with the differential impact of systems of privilege and oppression at the personal, community, and societal level. For instance, activities such as “privileged/targeted social identity timeline” or the “critical-incident exercise” take stock of students’ experiences growing up as members of privileged (dominant status, more powerful) and targeted (subordinated status, less powerful) social groups. The “power shuffle” examines the impact of social group membership at the personal and community level. Simulation activities such as “star power” can help students recognize the impact of status differentials and power dynamics and make connections to everyday life. Through introspection, encounter, and critical analysis, active learning methods motivate students to become more aware of their own roles in interpersonal, group, and systemic conflicts. With the support of readings from various perspectives, students are encouraged to question their personal biases, to consider alternative perspectives toward a particular issue, and to situate each other’s views and experiences in a larger social context.

An example of critical social awareness occurs in cross-race dialogues when the topic of “racial/ethnic separation and self-segregation” is explored. White students often perceive students of color as self-segregating on campus; yet to their surprise, students of color often see things the other way around. They think that white students are doing more of the self-segregation through their fraternities and sororities, intramural activities, study groups, living situations, and other campus activities. In the dialogue, the facilitators might challenge all students to consider what informs their perceptions of others’ behaviors and encourage them to explore the interpersonal and institutional factors that may contribute to some of these dynamics. Facilitators ask questions, present relevant concepts or information, validate and acknowledge difficulties and challenges, question misinformation, and invite students to explore some of the reasons behind their perceptions. Such a discussion often sheds light on the extent to which the racial dynamics on campus create a hostile environment for students of color and contribute to their perceived need for “safe spaces.” It also becomes apparent to white students that they actually are engaged in self-segregating behavior and that they need to take some responsibility for the campus climate.

**Bridge Building.** Critical and sustained conversation about issues of social identity and social stratification inevitably highlights conflicting perspectives across and within lines of difference. It also sheds light on the complex dynamics of connection and disconnection that result from estranged or oppressive relationships between members of social groups in the larger society. Such conflicts become valuable opportunities for students to engage in heart-to-heart conversations and discover together some of the underlying and multi-layered sources of tension and disconnection. The intergroup dialogue process begins to build bridges across differences when students can engage in difficult conversations, find value in each other’s feelings or perspectives, establish areas of common concern, and be willing to work—separately or together—to counter some of the effects of social injustice.

For example, bridging may occur when a white male student acknowledges his own privileged status with increased self-awareness, openness, and sensitivity to the experience of others and is willing to take some responsibility for the racial climate on campus; or when a woman of color talks about how she experiences race and racism on campus, openly struggles to understand and appreciate some of the experiences of her white counterparts, and then explores ways of working with people from privileged groups to counter injustice.

The bridging process also engages participants in a journey that embraces new visions and possibilities for response. It offers support for exploring new ways of being, relating, and taking action with people across race and other group boundaries. As Patricia Hill Collins argues in “Toward a New Vision: Race, Class, and Gender as Categories of Analysis