

*Making diversity work requires a deeper understanding of the meaning and consequences of group differences. Intergroup dialogue, says the author, is a promising approach to helping us understand one another, explore social and cultural differences, identify common ground, and communicate honestly.*

# BRIDGING DIFFERENCES THROUGH DIALOGUE

**B**UILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN PEOPLE FROM DIFFERENT social backgrounds becomes increasingly important as our society becomes more diverse and socially 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. However, bringing college students from different backgrounds together to talk, as anyone who has tried to do it knows, is a complex and challenging undertaking. This essay describes one promising approach for meeting this challenge, intergroup dialogue.

BY XIMENA ZÚÑIGA

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. The intergroup dialogue approach described in this essay began as part of an undergraduate initiative on intergroup relations in a small living-learning community at the University of Michigan during a time of heightened racial strife. It has since developed into a successful and nationally recognized programming effort sponsored by both student and academic affairs. This approach to intergroup education has been used or adapted by a number of universities, including Arizona State, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, University of Maryland-College Park, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, University of California-Long Beach, University of Washington-Seattle, and Mount Holyoke College.

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.

While each campus intergroup dialogue program is different (tailored to the specific needs of the campus, school, academic department or student affairs unit that it serves), dialogue groups are usually scheduled as stand-alone activities or as part of a course in psychology, sociology, education, American culture, or social work. They meet for seven to fourteen weeks, usually for two-hour sessions. Each dialogue group has twelve to eighteen students, with each of the social identity groups participating in the dialogue ideally represented equally. Students who earn academic credit for participating in an intergroup dialogue usually are required to complete weekly readings, log entries, and a final paper. In non-

credit dialogues, participants sometimes share a meal together and often agree to attend all sessions and to complete some readings. On some campuses, a celebratory gathering is organized at the end of the semester to affirm the efforts of all the students who participated in the intergroup dialogue.

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. It might include:

- learning objectives
- didactic or experiential activities
- a selection of readings such as personal testimonials from people of diverse backgrounds

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**Note:** For more information on the foundational and practical aspects of intergroup dialogue, see an article coauthored by Ximena Zúñiga with Biren (Ratnesh) Nagda and Todd D. Sevig, entitled *Intergroup Dialogues: An Educational Model for Cultivating Engagement Across Differences*.

- historical and sociological essays
- articles discussing controversial issues from different perspectives.

### 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. These processes inform the four-stage educational design that is described in this article.

**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,

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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 hos-

tile 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 multilayered 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 and Connection,” transcending barriers requires that we recognize how our differing experiences with social oppression can compromise our relationships. When we develop empathy

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and accountability for the experiences of individuals and groups different from our own, everyone benefits. In the intergroup dialogues, these capacities are developed by cultivating a sense of co-responsibility and solidarity across and within lines of difference. Facilitators invite students to “walk the talk” in their personal, student, or work life and identify concrete ways of moving from dialogue to action outside the group. For instance, students may decide to take more courses focusing on racism or sexism, join an organization on campus that is dealing with some of the issues addressed in the dialogue, or become a resident assistant or a student leader to improve the racial or gender climate of their residence hall. By using educational and community practice methods such as the ones described by educators and community activists like John Anner in *Beyond Identity Politics* or <http://www.thatway.org/dialogue>, students can begin to identify possible actions and resources for working for change and coalition building. The process of bridge building provides a structure that can potentially empower participants to improve intergroup relations on the college campus and for participants to take more responsibility for promoting equity and social justice in society.

## HOW ARE THE INTERGROUP DIALOGUES STRUCTURED?

CREATING HONEST AND reciprocal dialogues involves a sustained developmental process that fully appreciates the cognitively and emotionally challenging nature of exploring group differences—regardless of students’ social identity group and social status. The model incorporates a four-stage design using the interconnected processes of sustained communication, critical social awareness, and bridge building as foundational principles. The four stages build on one another, sequencing and pacing the movement from getting the group started, to dialogue, and finally to action. To illustrate how students experience the dia-

logue process, I have incorporated excerpts from interviews with, and final reflection papers from, five students who participated in a semester-long white people–bi-racial–people of color dialogue at the University of Massachusetts–Amherst.

### Stage 1. Creating an Environment for Dialogue

*White man (first-year student):*

I grew up in a predominantly white town and went to predominantly white schools. I joined the class because I wanted to broaden my social horizons and branch out even further . . . I wanted to hear about others’ experiences and also wanted to share my own. I liked listening to what others had to say to improve myself and how I treat others. Now I notice racism much more . . . I’ll be just like “that’s not cool.” It’s not even only about race . . . but also when people say “retarded” or “gay.” These types of situations make me think of conversations we had in class.

*Multiracial black woman (first-year student):*

The first couple of weeks we really didn’t have any dialogue. We set up ground rules and did “getting to know each other” exercises, and that really helped the entire process of feeling comfortable with everyone else in the group . . . you can now feel the bond in the group when you walk in the room. We have been following the rules we set up; no one has attacked anyone, there is just a nice, easy flow of dialogue. It is not about debating or trying to be right or correct.

The main goal of the first stage is to build a foundation for honest and meaningful interactions. Participants become acquainted with each other, discuss hopes and fears for the dialogue, and discuss guidelines (such

as confidentiality, no personal attacks, asking questions, and “conflict is okay”) that support dialogue and participation. Students get to know each other through team-building activities such as “scavenger hunt,” in which they gather information about each other, or diversity-awareness activities such as “multiple social identities,” in which they pick three or four salient social identities and talk about how these impact their experiences at school and in their home communities. Students also explore the different characteristics of dialogue and debate, identify behaviors that promote constructive dialogue, and begin to practice active listening and other dialogic skills. Two sessions are ideally scheduled for this first stage.

### **Stage 2. Situating the Dialogue: Learning About Differences and Commonalities of Experience**

*White woman (sophomore):*

This class provided me with facts, testimonies, statistics, et cetera, about white privilege and the inherent racism that unfortunately comes with it. It allowed me for the first time in my life to really look at myself and the kind of person I am. I have seen how my race and ethnicity have given me chances others don't have. Before I took this class, the fact that I had white privilege did not strike me as a big deal. I never stopped to think whether I was in a certain situation because I earned my way and belong there or because my skin was a shade lighter. I look at everything and every situation now from a different perspective, and I am ashamed of the mistreatment and judgment I see happening all around me.

*Multiracial black woman (first-year student):*

A couple of weeks ago there was this breakthrough in class when some of the white students understood that there is white privilege . . . it was amazing to witness this breakthrough because now I can understand some

of the issues surrounding that [process] and why it is sometimes difficult for white students to feel responsible for it. Then it was amazing to [listen to] one of the white students say “I am not going to feel guilty, I refuse to feel guilty, the only thing I can do is help.”

The second stage aims both to develop a shared vocabulary for talking about issues of social identity and social stratification and to situate similar and different experiences within a larger social narrative. Participants explore the impact of prejudice, in/out group dynamics, discrimination, and privilege at the personal, interpersonal, intergroup, and societal levels. Students enter the dialogues with differing levels of awareness of social group distinctions as well as varying degrees of readiness to engage in conversations about social identity affiliation in the context of power and privilege. This stage combines social awareness activities with increased opportunities for talking and listening to other students. Participants meet in homogeneous or social identity groups (such as an all-men group and an all-women group in a men-women dialogue) before exploring contentious or conflictual issues in heterogeneous groupings. Emotionally charged issues or difficult questions can thus be explored with people who may share similar experiences.

As students examine the advantages and disadvantages of their social group memberships in the context of systems of social stratification, they may begin to see the differential psychological and material impact of their privileged or targeted social status. For example, students from privileged groups often struggle to reconcile their own sense of self as individuals and as members of dominant groups, and may find themselves exploring these issues for the first time. This process can also be difficult for students from stigmatized or target social groups, especially when it results in revisiting painful experiences or confronting how their own thoughts and feelings may differ from those of students from the privileged groups in the dialogue process.

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Overall, this stage directs all students to value their own and others’ unique experiences as individuals and as members of social groups, to explore each others’ perspectives and concerns, and to begin to develop some understanding of the impact of group differences on people’s lives and group relationships.

Both homogeneous and heterogeneous group formats are used at this stage to challenge and support dialogue participants. Meeting in separate groups allows individuals to explore social identity issues and common concerns, identify questions for the other group, and thereby return to the larger group prepared to engage with these issues more fully. Facilitators must find ways to support students’ present level of awareness while also challenging them to recognize how differing experiences of power and privilege impact people’s material and psychological well-being in everyday life. Two to three sessions are ideally scheduled for this stage.

### **Stage 3. Exploring Conflicts and Multiple Perspectives: Dialoguing About “Hot” Topics**

*Asian American woman (senior):*

It is only in the atmosphere of this class that I feel that I could freely voice my opinions about topics such as racism. In our group, we had a lively discussion when a white female asked if it was possible for a black person (or any person of color) to be discriminating against a white person. I had strong views in that I think that could happen, but others felt it was not possible. It was a memorable day in that almost everyone contributed to the discussion. I don’t recall if we ever came to an agreement or actually answered the original question, but it was a very interesting topic where I learned a great deal from my peers in what they consider racism to be.

*White man (first-year student):*

My favorite topic was self-segregation because it is very evident on campus. When I read the articles I really agreed with [the one] that questioned special-interest floors and residence halls on campus, but after talking with

the group in class I changed my mind. I realized that it is good for the mental health of minority students if they have a safe environment to fall back into . . . so you can let the guard down and just relax. In class, some people didn’t think it was a good thing. There were different opinions and people could see both sides of it.

The third stage strives to encourage dialogue from multiple perspectives about contentious issues that are seldom explored in depth—whether inside or outside the college classroom. The choice of topics varies according to the focus of the intergroup dialogue and might include racial profiling, separation/self-segregation on campus, or affirmative action. Topics related to interpersonal interactions (such as racial profiling and separation/self-segregation on campus) are often scheduled before ones that require a more complex historical analysis (such as affirmative action) or volatile topics (such as hate crimes). Readings, videos, short presentations, fact sheets, census data, and structured activities may be used to stimulate dialogue or to anchor a particular topic of discussion. Facilitators in this stage rely on dialogic methods to encourage voicing and questioning. They pose questions that probe for deeper levels of thinking and feeling, and they invite participants to explore conflicts that come up. To encourage collective thinking and questioning, facilitators invite participants to respond to what others are saying and to build on each other’s comments and experiences. After discussion of each topic is concluded, participants identify questions to ponder and specific actions that might address a particular issue on campus. This stage typically schedules one session per topic discussed and includes one open session, during which students may explore emergent topics or hold a question-answer session. Four to five sessions are ideally scheduled for this stage.

### **Stage 4. Moving from Dialogue to Action: Action Planning and Alliance Building**

*Black man (first-year student):*

Participating in the dialogue makes me want to join more programs and organizations [on

campus] where I can address some of the issues addressed in the dialogue. There are several organizations, such as the Black Student Union and the ALANA caucus, that often deal with improving relations and creating alliances with other groups, and these were two important issues addressed in the dialogue.

*White woman (sophomore):*

I have improved my listening skills, my critical thinking skills, and how to respond to conflict in dialogues or conversations. I know that for myself the best course of action I could take in addressing the issues raised in class and in the readings is to share my knowledge and experience with people who have not been fortunate enough to take this class. I plan to take other classes to broaden my knowledge and awareness of class, race, ethnicity, and join organizations that deal with the issues we have [raised] in class.

This last stage of the intergroup dialogue builds on work done in the earlier stages but shifts the focus from dialogue to action planning and alliance building. Participants use the skills acquired in the dialogue to develop action plans and generate collective visions for a more inclusive and just future. For example, they may identify a commitment to learning about the history and experiences of groups different from their own; they may commit to challenging some manifestations of racism, sexism, or homophobia in their spheres of influence (personal, student, work, and family life); or they may decide to join a campus group that is directly addressing issues of discrimination on campus. Action planning may also target needed support from the various social identity groups in order to effect change in students' personal and public worlds. The facilitators invite participants to acknowledge everyone's contribution to the dialogue process and to celebrate the collective effort. One to two sessions are ideally scheduled for this stage.

## WHAT DO STUDENTS LEARN FROM INTERGROUP DIALOGUES?

*Multiracial black woman (first-year student):*

As I sit and reflect on what I've learned in this class, I can only smile. I have gone through a big transformation. My perceptions of people have changed. I have learned many useful skills. I am better at speaking in groups. The dialogue has forced me to listen when I just wanted to respond, so now I stop myself when I am thinking of my retort to really listen to what the person is saying, and when they finish I can pause, reflect, and then respond. My critical-thinking skills have also improved. I now question what influences and motivates everything. I also learned to better respond in touchy situations. Another really important skill I learned was exploring conflict. I have been inspired to continue to work for change.

The intergroup dialogue method can be a valuable approach for promoting honest and informed conversations about group differences. Key research findings about the benefits of this pedagogical model have been recently reviewed and summarized by Sylvia Hurtado in *Intergroup Dialogue: Deliberative Democracy in School, College, and Community* and by Walter Stephan and Cookie Stephan in *Improving Intergroup Relations*. Drawing from several qualitative and quantitative studies, both reviews find that dialogue participation is linked with positive effects on cognitive outcomes such as knowledge about other groups and discrimination in society, stereotype and prejudice reduction, development of complex thinking, social awareness of self and others in systems of inequality, and increased understanding about the causes of conflict between social groups. Dialogue participation is also found to reduce anxiety about intergroup contact and to enhance skills related to communication across differences, conflict exploration, perspective taking, and comfort dealing with diversity. Finally, participation in intergroup dialogues—as a participant or a student facilitator—promotes more active

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involvement in social justice work. While it may be that students who choose to participate in these dialogues are more inclined to develop these skills and behaviors, what is important is that, as the research suggests, the intergroup dialogues help students build on these inclinations.

Research also points to the importance of attending to process as well as outcome, as demonstrated in a recent study by Anna Yeakley, entitled *The Nature of Prejudice Change: Positive and Negative Change Processes Arising from Intergroup Contact Experiences*. Yeakley found that positive attitude change (change in reduction of prejudice and increased intergroup understanding) is related to a supportive and intimate sharing of intergroup experiences, while negative change was related to “painful” experiences associated with the perceived poor quality of the intergroup contact. Systematically attending to process issues may require a combination of different research methods to more fully capture the complexities of the intergroup dialogue process. My own experience with and research on intergroup dialogues suggests that a myriad of factors contribute to specific students’ outcomes and that particular factors may yield different effects for different types of students. In a study I conducted in collaboration with Biren (Ratnesh) A. Nagda entitled “Fostering Meaningful Racial Engagement Through Intergroup Dialogues,” it is suggested that students who report valuing the dialogic learning process are more likely to think more about race in everyday life, take the perspective of others, feel comfortable communicating across differences, develop positive beliefs about conflict, and express an interest in building bridges across differences at the end of an interracial dialogue process. Clearly, more research is needed to identify specific outcomes and their causes (such as participants’ readiness, group dynamics, leadership style, curriculum, and the structure and duration of dialogue activities). Also useful would be longitudinal research to examine the differential effects that various types of intergroup dialogue programming have on different types of students. As new campuses develop dialogue programs, it will be important to develop outcome and process-oriented inquiry efforts to better understand the benefits and challenges of this innovative critical-dialogical practice.

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