



Constructing Intercultural Dialogues Case Study #3

Intergroup Dialogue and Service Learning: Students as Facilitators

Sara DeTurk

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT SAN ANTONIO, TX, USA

Context

Each year the Communication Department at the University of Texas at San Antonio celebrates our discipline through ComWeek, a series of activities usually dominated by speakers from local industries addressing communication classes. This year, following the lead of our local public radio station's campaign to heighten the level of civic discourse, our theme for ComWeek was "Dare to Listen." I thought it was a perfect opportunity to organize a structured intergroup dialogue program for the campus community.

At the time, I was teaching a senior capstone class on training and group facilitation, and my students were excited about the opportunity to put what they were learning into practice. Our university does not have an existing intergroup dialogue program, but we do have a Student Center for Community Engagement and Inclusion, whose leadership was enthusiastic about partnering with us. We organized the event together, with the SCCEI reserving a room on campus and providing material support in the form of pizza to attract participants.

Participants

Between 50 and 60 students (and two faculty members) attended the event. I served as the event moderator, and my students were dispersed in pairs at round tables to which other attendees were randomly assigned. They represented the full diversity of the student body at this minority-majority university in terms of nationality, ethnicity, race, religion, gender, and sexual orientation.

Description

Once participants were settled at tables of 8-10 (with name tags and pizza), I welcomed them, explained the value of intergroup dialogue, and related it to



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current events and the ComWeek theme. I then introduced a series of ground rules. before turning responsibility over to the student facilitators, who (within their small groups) asked participants to introduce themselves and share something the others might not guess about them. They were also invited to propose additions to the ground rules. For the next 45 minutes, they held open-ended conversations about culture, identity, and difference, guided by prompts such as:

- Which of your social identities are especially important to you, and why?
- What is something you would want other people to know about you and a group of which you are a member?
- Have you ever been the target of prejudice or discrimination?
- Have you ever intervened to interrupt discrimination or stereotyping? Have you seen others do so in ways that you admired? How would you like others to do so on your behalf?

At the end of the hour, facilitators wrapped up their dialogues by inviting participants to reflect on the experience and consider “where to go from here.” I then reconvened the large group and provided closure by inviting participants to share their observations.

Dialogic features

The ground rules presented to participants were: (1) speaking from personal experience rather than ideology, (2) listening to understand, (3) accepting differences rather than seeking consensus, (4) respecting confidentiality, and (5) avoiding interruptions or other forms of disrespect.

These enabled the conversations to reflect the characteristics of dialogue as defined by Johannesen (1990), which include authenticity, inclusion, confirmation, presentness, a spirit of mutual equality, and a supportive climate.

Lessons learned

In written reflections after the event, students observed that because of the ground rules and skilled facilitation, the environments in their groups were safe, inclusive, and non-judgmental. As a result, they felt open to express vulnerability,



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share their thoughts honestly, and listen respectfully. They came away surprised not only by the challenges experienced by members of different social groups, but also moved by others' willingness to interrogate their own internalized stereotypes, prejudices, systemic privilege, and occasional discrimination. Almost to a person, too, they found parallels across different dimensions of marginalization and concluded that there was more that united them than divided them. One participant summarized her experience as follows:

I personally gained a great deal of understanding by hearing different points of view regarding identities. There's so much I misunderstood or didn't know about what challenges different identities experienced. I left with a new respect for different cultures and I was grateful to have had the chance to have conversations with people who were completely different than me. I also left with some guidance on how I can cultivate conversations like this outside of structured dialogue. I think it's important to know how to effectively discuss topics like this in a way that is mindful of others, and it is a topic that allows people to know others more deeply.

Reference:

Johannesen, R. L. (1990). *Ethics in human communication* (3rd ed.). Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.