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Using Dialogue to Create Inclusive Classrooms

A Case Study from a Faculty Institute

CLASSROOMS SHOULD BE LIBERATORY SPACES where people are nurtured and content comes to life.[1] But students and faculty frequently note the charged nature of the classroom, especially when course content focuses on aspects of identity such as race and ethnicity or dynamics related to power and inequality. Some students, particularly those from underrepresented groups, report that classrooms are among the most difficult spaces on campus. They describe feeling invisible, not listened to, and as though they do not belong; students of color are sometimes singled out as spokespersons for their entire race and regularly experience racial microaggressions.[2] Faculty of color and female faculty describe challenges in the classroom as well: they report not receiving the respect or deference that many white male faculty enjoy; students challenge their authority and subject-matter expertise more readily; and they receive lower course evaluations, due in part to bias and stereotyping.[3]

These arduous dynamics were the motivation for a Faculty Dialogues Institute offered by the Program on Intergroup Relations (IGR) and the Center for Research on Learning and

The use of dialogic tools in the classroom can produce powerful changes in how faculty engage their students, resulting in opportunities for deeper learning

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Teaching (CRLT) at the University of Michigan. Like many faculty teaching workshops, this institute aimed to help faculty create effective classrooms that are fully inclusive of today's students; but it took a unique approach by focusing specifically on intergroup dialogue strategies.

Intergroup dialogue is a methodology created at the University of Michigan more than twenty-five years ago. When applied in the classroom, it challenges "banking"[4] approaches to education by teaching about power and inequality while empowering students to participate equitably in the dialogue space. In intergroup dialogue, individuals from at least two social identity groups engage in deep listening, ask questions with the goal of understanding multiple perspectives, draw on both course content and others' identity-based experiences to deepen learning, and reflect collectively on what has been learned in order to create more inclusive spaces and strengthen understanding of course material.[5]

With our CRLT colleagues Theresa Braunschneider and Crisca Bierwert, both experts or building inclusive classrooms, we offered a three-day institute that emphasized intergroup dialogue as a methodology for challenging the dysfunctional dynamics outlined at the beginning of this article. Relying on nominations by chairs of the departments of American Culture, Women's Studies, Afroamerican and African Studies, and several other social science and humanities disciplines, we invited faculty members from the University of Michigan to apply to participate. At the institute, as in intergroup dialogue more generally, we intentionally created diverse dialogue groups to encourage active participation and balance power dynamics

Of the fifty-nine individuals who participated over four years, thirty-seven were faculty of color and twenty-two were white; thirty-six were women and twenty-three were men. With purposeful attention to the balance of identities, we were able to foster small-group interactions where no one was tokenized and where all faculty felt supported and able to contribute their authentic selves.

Framing the institute goals

In their applications, participants wrote about their motivations for attending the institute. Across the four cohorts, five themes emerged.

All participants wrote about the challenge of *connecting course content to student experiences.* One wrote, "I would like to learn how to draw from students' experiences and emotional responses to material and connect them to conceptual frameworks I am covering in the class." Another wrote, "I place a heavy emphasis on critical thinking and the evaluation of evidence … however, I suspect the seminar discussions could be even more engaging if I could draw more on student knowledge and experiences."

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A second theme was *how to foster both critical thinking and empathy.* One person described wanting "to help my students to grow as thinkers *and* as empathetic human beings through substantive and engaging discussion of difference." Another wrote, "As a teacher, I fervently hope that each of my students will walk out of my classroom with increased capacity for critical thinking, greater empathy for others, and more substantive knowledge of the world in which we live."

A third theme, *creating an inclusive classroom,* focused on ensuring a classroom environment where students learn from others who differ from them in various ways. One participant wrote, "One of the biggest challenges I find is creating a space where students from very different backgrounds can question and reflect upon their own experiences in a critical and constructive way without feeling threatened, isolated, defensive, or embarrassed by their own positions, especially in contrast with others."

A fourth theme, *using inquiry methods and building inquiry skills among students,* reflected a desire to help students notice and challenge dominant narratives (such as color blindness,

or the claim that one "does not see" skin color) that often go unnoticed in classroom discussion: "I find that today's students … come from well-to-do neighborhoods where their school systems have taught them to 'not see' difference in order to avoid offense. Thus, one of my most urgent needs is to learn about new methods of inquiry for student engagement." Several participants noted that students rarely ask questions in class— and when they do, the questions are nearly always directed at the faculty member. These faculty members saw building inquiry skills as an especially important course goal because the content of their courses inevitably involved controversy, and thus required students to learn how to interrogate material through different and often opposing viewpoints.

A final theme was *dealing with faculty members' own racial and gender identities in classroom dynamics.* Many participants wrote about the risks attached to being open about their social identities when teaching about race or inequality. For example, one wrote, "It is widely known that white, cisgendered, heterosexual men are more convincing to students than other instructors when it comes to explaining the corrosive effects of white supremacy in the United States, especially as such instructors might be regarded as disinterested, as not benefiting from the critique of racial hegemony."

These five themes framed the institutes' goals: (1) to integrate student knowledge and experiences with conceptual frameworks and course content; (2) to hone inquiry and listening skills; (3) to turn contentious, tense moments into learning opportunities; and (4) to ensure inclusivity.

Institute design

We aligned the institute design directly with the themes and goals described above by emphasizing dialogic approaches to creating inclusive classrooms. These approaches include understanding how dialogue differs from both discussion and debate, setting expectations, making use of narrative, engaging in inquiry, and turning contentious moments into learning opportunities. We emphasized practice by having participants teach something from their course curricula, and we facilitated participants' collective reflection about the experience.

Understanding dialogue. Appreciating the distinctions between dialogue, discussion, and debate is crucial in an intergroup dialogue setting.

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While these forms of communication can all stimulate learning, dialogue prompts students to analyze the assumptions underlying their own and others' comments, to examine why different people have different perspectives, and to probe one another's ideas. To help faculty practice all three types of communication, we placed institute participants in three groups and gave each group a variation of the same prompt: *Dialogue [or debate or discuss] the merits of the city's policy to prohibit smoking in public places.* Each group demonstrated its assigned communication style through role playing. In contrast to the tense debate and the noncommittal discussion, the dialogue invited a variety of perspectives, helped the group dig deeper, and allowed participants to examine the multiple viewpoints present in the room or represented through the readings.

Setting expectations. Building dialogic classrooms begins with setting norms, which can mean inviting students to help establish guidelines for engagement. Yet only one-third to one-half of faculty participants at the institute reported having intentionally set expectations for the kinds of classroom discourse they sought to establish, and even fewer invited students to participate in this process. To model what faculty could do in their own classrooms, we talked about creating norms for the institute so all felt engaged and willing to participate. We handed out sample guidelines, conducted small-group discussions, and identified which guidelines would be particularly helpful in the institute context. After the full group agreed to a set of guidelines, we conducted a meta-facilitation to demonstrate how one might use this exercise to establish classroom norms at the beginning of a semester.

Making use of narrative. Shared narratives about meaningful personal experiences are important components of intergroup dialogue.

To illustrate the power of storytelling, we used a generative listening exercise that allowed faculty participants to examine their strengths, skills, and capacities through narrative. In this exercise, a speaker shares two experiences, and a listener identifies qualities the speaker has conveyed—perhaps unknowingly—in telling the two stories. At the institute, we asked faculty to pair up and share an example of effective teaching and an example of less effective teaching, with the listener identifying strengths and capacities that were implicit in both stories. This exercise helped participants discover strengths they could rely on even in challenging teaching moments and reflect on how to structure their classrooms in relation to those strengths.

Building inquiry strategies. Data collected through a large multisite study of intergroup dialogues in higher education have revealed the relative effectiveness of four facilitator behaviors: inquiry, reflection/redirection, listening/support, and adversarial advocacy.[6] Of the four, inquiry—the act of eliciting new information through questioning—promoted the most robust dialogic communication among students in intergroup dialogue classes. Reflection and redirection also produced opportunities for dialogue. Perhaps surprisingly, passive listening and support on their own were associated with less dialogue; more predictably, adversarial advocacy—where the instructor takes a strong position opposing a student's point of view— shut down participation among students. At the institute, we encouraged faculty to consider how they might apply these findings in their classrooms by asking dialogic questions and helping students practice dialogic inquiry with one another. In small groups, faculty considered their own classroom approaches and the types of questions they typically ask their students:

Do they promote a question-and-answer approach that requires factual or "correct" answers, or do they promote inquiry that allows new questions and dialogue to emerge? How might they shift their practice to offer more opportunities for inquiry, especially opportunities for students to ask questions of one another?

Turning contentious moments into learning opportunities. There is no single way to approach contentious situations in the classroom, and the social identities of those involved—both students and faculty—can inflect these situations. To help faculty participants practice turning contentious moments into opportunities for learning, we drew from their application statements to present challenging classroom scenarios, using the Forum Theatre approach adapted from Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed.*[7] Institute leaders played the roles of students, while faculty participants played faculty addressing contentious moments in the classroom. Faculty could call time outs and ask someone else to replay the scenario or pick up the scene at a given moment. Participants often cited these role-playing exercises as among the most challenging and the most supportive aspects of the institute; these exercises helped them gain confidence in their ability to intervene in moments of conflict.

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Practice. Practice in a challenging yet supportive environment is essential to gaining confidence with new strategies. Therefore, a whole day of the institute focused on practice of the dialogic strategies covered in previous days. Faculty participants broke into small groups, each led by an institute co-leader, to facilitate a classroom discussion or dialogue with four other participants role-playing as students. Participants selected short passages, images, or video clips that posed the kinds of challenges they hoped to address at the institute. All participants practiced teaching other participants the content they had chosen, and all received feedback on their use of dialogic strategies to teach their specific content and effectively engage students.

Collective reflection. Group reflection is a key component of the dialogue process, and one that is easily adaptable to any classroom setting. At the conclusion of each day of the institute, we offered an opportunity for participants to make individual and collective meaning out of

that day's exercises by reflecting on questions such as *What did we learn in today's session? Did something come up that you hadn't thought about before— or that pushed you to think in a new way? How do the different experiences that have been shared connect to our social identities and to what we do in our classrooms?* These opportunities for reflection reinforced the interconnectedness of institute exercises, emphasized the exercises' effect on institute goals, and helped faculty make meaning across the exercises. They also modeled the use of reflection as another effective pedagogical tool.

Overall impact

In evaluations of their own learning completed at the end of each institute, participants across all four years indicated that the following activities were very helpful (with average ratings of 4.5 to 5 on a five-point scale): facilitating students' learning from one another; developing dialogue strategies and skills that can be used to deepen discussions of identity and power; building inquiry for student engagement; moving back and forth from the analytical to the personal and staying grounded in both personal experience and the course framework; practicing handling moments in the classroom when one is unsettled or uncertain; and bringing out-of-class experiences into the course in ways that enhance learning. Participants also wrote about the importance of developing a community with other faculty members who are trying to promote critical thinking and empathy while helping students learn about identity, power, difference, and social justice. Many also stressed the importance of developing a language for discussing pedagogy, teaching strategies, and issues related to faculty identities. Nearly all participants wrote positively about the structure of the institute, and they especially valued the opportunities to model and practice dialogic ways of engaging students. They appreciated that the institute included time for reflection and activities that helped them realize their strengths as teachers in situations that they described as "highly charged," "complex," "complicated," "contested," or "delicate."

Immediately after the final year of the institute, we sent participants from all four years a follow-up survey asking which dialogic approaches they were using most or least in their teaching. (Notably, at this point, faculty who had participated in the earlier institutes were reflecting on several years of teaching.)

Respondents mentioned that they were still employing classroom guidelines or norms that set the tone and expectations, collective reflection activities probing what students had learned in individual class sessions, student work in pairs or small groups, activities that facilitate students' ability to connect course content to their experiences, in-class writing assignments that prepare students for discussion, and activities that build comfort with what dialogue is and how to use it. They also continued to use difficult moments as opportunities to facilitate student learning.

Participants' free responses were particularly telling. One wrote, "I have become more open in my commitment to dialogue and discussing it with the class." Another said, "The Institute made me so much more determined to interact with students in a more genuine dialogue; it also made me more aware of my limitations in facilitating dialogue, and I would like to develop these skills more, with more support." Several participants mentioned not only a new openness to dialogue, but also greater comfort with exploratory approaches more generally. One wrote, "I have become freer to try out different ways of reaching students so they understand the material better"; another, "I'm more skillful at integrating diverse perspectives." Several mentioned being more open to student experiences. One wrote, "It has made me open to connecting material to student lives. I avoided that before." Another noted, "I've really tried to acknowledge that there will be 'hot moments' in class discussions, and that this isn't a bad thing, or a thing to be avoided."

These responses from institute participants show that the use of dialogic tools in the classroom can produce powerful changes in how faculty engage their students, resulting in opportunities for deeper learning. Intergroup dialogue produces greater understanding of inequality and builds opportunities for empathy and collaboration.[8] Even in traditionally structured classrooms, dialogic tools can help bridge differences. By establishing norms, listening deeply, using inquiry skills, and reflecting on collective learning, faculty and students can transform traditional classrooms into liberatory learning spaces where all students' voices are valued and conflict can be productive for all, rather than harmful for members of marginalized communities. □

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NOTES

1. For more on classrooms as liberatory spaces, see Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed: New Revised 20th-Anniversary Edition* (New York: Continuum, 1998); for more on the idea of nurturing in education, see bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

2. Some of these accounts come from campus-specific reports. See Stacy Anne Harwood, Shinwoo Choi, Moises Orozco, Margaret Browne Huntt, and Ruby Mendenhall, *Racial Microaggressions at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign: Voices of Students of Color in the Classroom* (Urbana-Champaign, IL: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2015) and Kelly E. Maxwell, "Summary Findings from Community Conversations on Race" (unpublished report of the Understanding Race Project, University of Michigan, 2013) as examples. For more on microaggressions, see Guy A. Boysen, "Teacher and Student Perceptions of Microaggressions in College Classrooms," *College Teaching* 60, no. 3 (2012): 122–29.

3. These descriptions are widely cited. See, for example, Roxanna Harlow, "'Race Doesn't Matter, but ...': The Effect of Race on Professors' Experiences and Emotion Management in the Undergraduate College Classroom," in "Race, Racism, Discrimination," special issue, *Social Psychology Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (December 2003): 348–63; and Chavella T. Pittman, "Race and Gender Oppression in the Classroom: The Experiences of Women Faculty of Color with White Male Students," *Teaching Sociology* 38, no. 3 (July 2010): 183–96.

4. As described by Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1998), "banking" approaches assume that faculty experts "deposit" knowledge to students, who then store or "bank" that knowledge.

5. Patricia Gurin, Biren (Ratnesh) A. Nagda, and Ximena Zúñiga, *Dialogue Across Difference: Practice, Theory, and Research on Intergroup Dialogue* (New York: Russell Sage, 2013).

6. Gurin, Nagda, and Zúñiga, *Dialogue Across Difference*.

7. Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985).

8. See Gurin, Nagda, and Zúñiga, *Dialogue Across Difference*; Biren (Ratnesh) A. Nagda, Patricia Gurin, Nicholas Sorensen, and Ximena Zúñiga, "Evaluating Intergroup Dialogue: Engaging Diversity for Personal and Social Responsibility," *Diversity & Democracy* 12, no. 1 (Winter 2009): 4–6.