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GIFT ARTICLE

Dialogue as Praxis for Engaging the Intercultural World***Jennifer E. Potter, PhD****Associate Professor*jpotter@towson.edu*Department of Communication Studies**Towson University**Towson, MD****Erin L. Berry-McCrea, PhD****Instructor*eberry@towson.edu*Department of Communication Studies**Towson University**Towson, MD***Abstract**

Intergroup Dialogue (IGD) is a formalized program that centers dialogue among students in the classroom. The IGD program uses Martin Buber's (1970) concept of dialogue, and this semester-long project situates dialogue as a useful addition to an Intercultural Communication course. Bringing components of a formal dialogue program into the classroom as a part of a course allows students to engage with difficult topics, such as race, gender, sexual orientation, class, and ability, among others, in a way that helps students process and better understand perspectives different from their own. This essay provides specific opportunities for meaningful dialogue and concludes an evaluation of our semester-long project and the lessons learned along the way.

Courses

Intercultural Communication and Interpersonal Communication

Objectives

- Build knowledge, values, and skills for dialogue.
- Develop and identify one's self as a reflexive cultural being attuned to difference.
- Explore differences and similarities of perceptions/experiences of controversial issues across and in social identity groups.

Introduction and Rationale

Embracing dialogue in the Intercultural Communication course is not a new idea, as instructors have often used class discussion as a key component of many versions of the course. However, we argue that embracing dialogue in the classroom typically plays out in the form of class discussions around specific course material rather than through a purposeful and intentional

structure for dialogue. Simpson, Causey, and Williams (2007) collected focus group and one-on-one interview data about class discussions centering on issues of race and diversity, and found that students identify a number of barriers to addressing race in classroom discussions. Barriers include specific instructor practices, such as how class discussions are graded and a lack of value placed on the importance of participation, and specific student practices, including the gap in knowledge and experience among students and discomfort in addressing sensitive topics or talking controversially about controversial topics (Simpson, Causey, & Williams, 2007). Many of these potential barriers could be solved, if instructors were to intentionally design a course around and embedded with dialogue as a foundational component.

We use the term dialogue, here, to build on the work of Martin Buber (1970), who argued that dialogue is about the process of understanding and articulating one's own position while also being truly open to understanding the other and her/his/their position. The notion is to really, truly listen to another while also speaking one's truth. While it may sound utopian, the framework opens up space for individuals to sit together and remove the blinders that so often keep us from thinking beyond ourselves, and to instead really engage the realities of multiple perspectives. In addition to this framework, we modify a well-established dialogue program, Intergroup Dialogue (IGD) to provide us with specific and intentional activities and prompts that we believe can be modified and applied in communication courses. To this end, this manuscript adds to the already existing literature on IGD with new insights on its application to courses like Intercultural Communication that already feature content that is inclusive of multicultural experiences and voices.

Our approach, which spanned an entire semester, was to give students skills to dialogue around difficult topics using pieces of the formalized Intergroup Dialogue (IGD) program by modeling intercultural dialogue ourselves and using IGD strategies in a classroom without a fully structured IGD program; it also required our intentional and purposeful reflection about why we were asking our students to dialogue, how we were preparing them to dialogue, and how we were debriefing from dialogue. As we detail below, IGD is a solidified and somewhat rigid program, but our goal with this pedagogical approach was to take the best parts of the IGD program—the actual strategies that get students talking in meaningful ways—and apply them to a classroom centered on issues of identity and culture without the rigidity of a formalized program.

Description of Activity

Intergroup Dialogue is not a new process; in fact, it is a process that has been around for more than ten years, but colleges and universities have recently begun embracing it in light of increasing polarized political views, racialized incidents on college campuses, and the pervasive structural systems of patriarchy, racism, sexism, and classism. For starters, IGD is “an innovative practice in higher education that promotes student engagement across cultural and social divides, fostering learning about social diversity and inequalities and cultivating an ethos of social responsibility” (Zuniga, Nagda, Chesler, & Cytron-Walker, 2007, p. 1). The primary goal is actually quite straightforward: help students learn how to talk to one another in open and honest ways about difficult issues we sometimes avoid.

In the Intergroup Dialogue model, dialogue, as a classroom activity, can occur one or more times during a semester (with the ideal scenario being over several class sessions), and should consist of two faculty members (one of a dominant identity group and one of a minority

identity group; identity groups are broadly conceived—race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, class, ability, ethnicity, etc.) who facilitate a conversation with members of the class. The two faculty members plan a conversation stimulus designed to get students to talk about how identity impacts them in a variety of possible ways. For example, the stimulus could be a recent news event, an ongoing controversy, or a sociopolitical situation (e.g., Black Lives Matter protests, Colin Kaepernick's "Take a Knee" campaign, and diversity programs on campus). Before diving into difficult or controversial topics, though, it is useful to prepare students for this form of engagement through the use of low-risk topics that attend to student interests and hobbies. This allows students to ease into the activity and learn the rules of engagement, while also providing them with the opportunity to observe others and ask questions of themselves, each other and their faculty facilitators. The authors are particularly fond of two activities (caucusing and fishbowls) to spur conversation, which can be utilized as a one-time activity in a course or repeated multiple times on varying topics.

Caucusing

The first activity is to have students "caucus" among identity groups. For example, if the conversation centers around racial identity, wherein one facilitator is a person of color and the other facilitator is a white person, the facilitators can separate the class into these two groups--students of color caucus with the faculty member of color and white students caucus with the white faculty member. The caucus can be replicated for a variety of identities—gender, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, or political orientation, among others. The caucus works best when there are generally the same number of students in each group, but even when the numbers aren't even, minority students with fewer members of their caucus and majority students with more members of their caucus benefit from the experience of separating, discussing something controversial within what is perceived as a safer space, and then returning to the larger dialogue. We would not recommend a caucus that doesn't include a group that has at least three students.

The caucus allows students to talk more freely for a few minutes, surrounded by students with similar identities, which opens up the conversation; when the caucuses disperse and the groups come back together, conversation typically is more free-flowing, which serves two purposes: (1) students can really dig into the discussion in ways they may not have been ready for with the class as a whole; and (2) the larger group can process what it felt like to be separated and how those experiences may have been different (or not) for the two caucus groups.

Fishbowls

A second activity is the fishbowl activity. The fishbowl allows for two or more people to sit inside an inner circle with everyone else sitting in an outer circle. Those in the circle discuss a particular issue while those in the outside circle only listen. Students can rotate in and out of the fishbowl, but must follow the rules of each of the circles. This is a particularly effective activity for faculty to model first--where the two facilitators can start as the discussants in the inner circle to demonstrate effective conversation, vulnerability, and multiple perspectives around controversial topics before moving out of the inner circle and letting others in. While this is certainly not a new activity, we think its use within the context of creating productive dialogues cannot be overstated.

Additionally, there are creative adaptations of the fishbowl that are especially useful for dialogue; for example, a fishbowl activity that is extremely effective in the beginning stages of creating productive dialogues is to pose a question, such as: growing up, what were the messages you received about what it meant to be a child of your gender? Pairs sit in the fishbowl and one person answers the question, talking for at least two minutes; the other person sits and listens (cannot interrupt or ask questions). Then, the pairs switch. Once everyone has been inside the fishbowl, the facilitators lead a discussion about how it felt to talk, without interruption, and also how it felt to listen, without ability to comment. The conversation then turns to the actual learned information—what messages dictate gender? How does that inform us as children about how to “act”? Do we conform to or rebel against those standards?

Procedure

Key to providing a positive dialogue environment for students is for the instructors to ask the students to craft dialogue rules and expectations before dialogue ever begins. Students should be encouraged to determine what and how and in what ways they want the dialogue process to work. Oftentimes, students ask for rules to include things like, “everyone should be respectful of everyone else’s opinion,” “listen instead of assume,” “take care of yourself, in whatever way you need to,” “it’s okay to make mistakes, to acknowledge others’ mistakes, and to work through the implications of mistakes,” “everyone should talk in every dialogue,” and others. The rules are important for maintaining accountability for everyone in the dialogue.

Students are asked to read a cultural/academic article and then watch a brief video or view a digital toolkit online that provides information about the next class session. After stimuli are selected by the instructors and shared with the students, the instructors should discuss their plan for encouraging the students to engage in dialogue. Oftentimes, this requires the instructors to model vulnerability and openness and then draw students into the conversation. As stated above, specific activities (like caucusing or fishbowl activities) can be helpful, but they are not necessarily needed for dialogue to occur.

Best practices of dialogues include a short wrap-up activity at the end of each dialogue so that students can feel ready to exit the dialogue, just as they had to ready themselves to enter the dialogue. This typically comes in the form of a brief reflective activity and can be as simple as going around the room and asking students to identify one thing they learned today or one emotion they felt today or one hope they have for the next dialogue.

Debriefing

Students should journal about their experiences in the classroom and then faculty members should use the journals to understand how students are responding to difficult conversations differently. There is significant research about the need for journaling and reflection for students engaged in controversial and/or complex class discussions (King & LaRocco, 2006). This is important because students are oftentimes learning about concepts and ideas as they employ them, so the journaling allows students to respond to and ask questions about course concepts as well as ideas raised during the discussion.

Evaluation

As we look back over our semester-long use of dialogue as a classroom activity, we came to three primary conclusions: dialogue is a necessary tool for student engagement in the 21st century, dialogue is a helpful tool in assessing student understanding of key terms, ideas, and concepts, and dialogue can be extremely difficult, both in terms of the preparation and mental work. The section that follows explores our conclusions as we also consider future opportunities to continue this work.

Dialogue as a Necessary Tool

We noticed that as long as a discussion was happening, students were much less likely to look at their laptops and grab their cell phones. Sherry Turkle (2015) notes that even more so now than ever, we must recognize that our mediated world distances us from “face-to-face conversation [which] us the most human--and humanizing--thing we do...fully present to one another; we learn to listen” (p. 3). Overall, student feedback about dialogue was positive. The average of positive feelings about their experiences in sessions that included both authors was 3.95. On the other side of this spectrum, negative feelings about the activity were at an average of 1.46. We measured these feelings by asking students to complete the “Feelings of Understanding Misunderstanding Scale,” adapted from Cahn and Shulman’s (1984) scale, which asked respondents to categorize and rank a variety of feelings.

Dialogue as an Assessment Tool

Second, dialogue is a helpful tool in assessing student understanding of key terms, ideas, and concepts. Walter Fisher’s (1984) explication that humans are storytellers is helpful here--while students can learn theory and complex concepts by reading about them, they can often do much better by relating complex ideas to their own lived experiences and others’ lived experiences. Allowing students an opportunity to talk about their own experiences, within the context of academic content, is helpful for them to grasp it in new ways that can create long-lasting learning.

Dialogue is Hard Work

Finally, dialogue can be extremely difficult, both in terms of the preparation and mental work involved in setting up the dialogue activities and the emotional labor of helping students dialogue more effectively while also finding ways to be vulnerable as a faculty member in the classroom. The authors found this to be true collectively and individually. We believe that, despite the mental and emotional labor involved in the activity, it is worth the effort, as students responded overwhelmingly positively to the dialogue classes and especially appreciated the modeling of dialogue among faculty members from two different cultural groups. bell hooks (1994) reminds scholars and teachers engaged in this type of work that “it is crucial that critical thinkers who want to change our teaching practices talk to one another, collaborate in a discussion that crosses boundaries and creates a space for intervention” (p. 129).

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