Chapter 1

Intergroup Dialogue: Democracy at Work in Theory and Practice

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The issues range from race relations to family relations and from peace talks to schoolyard discipline. Today, people in all walks of life report they are confronted with problems of intergroup relations, and many seek some venue to join in dialogue about these issues. Why? Because every day in contemporary society we face conflicts rooted in the historical legacies of the social divisions of our country and because, at the same time, we embrace a pluralistic and democratic America that functions on deliberation, thrives on difference of opinion, and operates on principles of representation. How do we achieve our highest aspirations for a just society in the face of continuing segregation and social divisions in the United States? Each of us, in addition to our unique, individual identities, is a representation of our communities, be they organized by race and ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or class. We must talk with each other to survive as a society. For individuals, success in an increasingly diverse society will depend on having the skills to bridge the spectrum of social differences to help create the type of society we aspire to be. Further, it is important to develop a vehicle for more individuals to deal comfortably with conflict, social differences, and sociohistorical legacies that shape their daily interactions.

Although the notion of bringing groups together to address longstanding conflict has been with us for a great many years, it has gained acclaim and renewed interest as the nation enters the twenty-first century. A small number of education, community, and business leaders have quietly fostered and advanced intergroup dialogue and other conversations at the local level for over a decade (Statham 1997). Media interest and public awareness rose to a new level when President Bill Clinton highlighted the notion of dialogue in the mid-1990s as part of his “Initiative on Race” (One America 1998). He and Hillary Clinton, among others, suggested that the emotional and political closure that had followed the civil rights movement could be replaced by an ongoing national conversation.
meeting, moderated televised conversations in auditoriums filled with thousands of adults and children. Others jumped on the bandwagon, offering what they referred to as “dialogues” to high school and college students, community and government leaders, and corporate managers (Promising Practices 1997). These dialogues came in forms that varied widely in format, including workshops, lectures, one-time, one-hour conversations about race and diversity; and peer-mediated, small, interactive, sustained face-to-face discussions between two groups in conflict (Promising Practices 1997; Statham 1997; Du Bois and Hutson 1997; Sherman et al. 1998).

We clearly embrace the notion of conversation and dialogue, and we applaud much of the work that has gone forward under this broad umbrella. However, we approach the topic with some particular notions as to what intergroup dialogue is and what it is not, and what are the conceptual underpinnings of this uniquely democratic practice. We also have a clear sense of the difficult practical, intellectual, and theoretical struggles that exist for those who engage in this activity and wish to bring about understanding among groups to bridge differences that are evident. In this chapter we present our framework for thinking conceptually and pragmatically about intergroup dialogue by discussing intergroup dialogue as deliberative democracy, defining what is intergroup dialogue, and exploring its place in a just and diverse democracy.

**Intergroup Dialogue as Deliberative, Participatory Democracy**

One of the greatest challenges facing democracy in the United States is for its citizens to learn how to live together across their different backgrounds without resorting to inequality, subjugation, and oppression. It is the challenge of how best to build upon difference and conflict in ways that are beneficial to the development and sustenance of a just society (West 1994; Young 1990). This challenge is bound to the history of humankind, not just the history of the United States. But it is an ideal that the American people have long held for the country and its democratic principles through our nation's history and into the present (Hughes 1992; Takaki 1993). The ideal speaks forcefully to the enormous amount of work yet to be done. And yet there are no other national examples to turn to that offer a sustained, successful model for the development of a just society. In fact, the negative models, precisely what we wish to reach beyond, continue to predominate throughout the world. The necessary vision, and the accompanying responsibility and work to see it to fruition, rests today with each and every citizen participating together in the best of democratic practice (Guarasci and Cornwell 1997).

In recent years a growing concern has been expressed for the strength and endurance of democracy in the United States. The uprisings/riots of 1992 in East Los Angeles, the growth of militia groups, and the widespread cynicism toward federal and state governments exemplified by the Clinton impeachment debates are symbolic of a deepening crisis facing the core of this nation (West 1994). Progress toward racial justice moves ever so slowly even in the best of economic times, assaults on separation of church and state are unceasing, violent hate crimes against gays are reported with increasing frequency, the gap between wealthy and poor seems impenetrable, and moves to reduce gender inequity are blamed for much of society's ills. The yuppies and "Me" generation of the 1980s, the enormous accumulations of assets by our wealthiest, and the growing influence of the corporate and special interest lobby groups all carry a message that is a far cry from President John Kennedy's famous words, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country."

The decline of the last quarter century in civic engagement and the deep cynicism toward public life have been publicly heralded by the "bowling alone" metaphor made popular by Robert Putnam (2000). The significant declines in voter turnout and political involvement, the very low interest in current events on the part of young people, the drastic drop in public trust of the federal government and government leaders, and the astonishingly negative turnout in participation in public meetings for towns or schools lead many to worry deeply about the decline of civic society and democratic institutions (Dionne 1998). While others interpret the data in a somewhat less threatening manner (Wuthnow 1998), they still acknowledge a sense of porosity in society's civic life, a withdrawal from the traditional communal infrastructures and bonds toward a society that is held together only by “loose connections.”

Skocpol and Fiorina (1999, 2) write, “Everyday Americans are increasingly mere spectators of public affairs. Much of the time they are benignly disinterested observers; at other moments angry or cynical. Either way, ordinary citizens have less and less involvement in shaping our common affairs.” In turn, the very real danger to society is that our democracy is both increasingly organized by those who are more privileged and, as a result, increasingly serves the interests of those who are more privileged.
The decline in democratic processes is certainly one source of concern, but it is almost necessarily accompanied by a concern about democratic outcomes, in this case, continuing and growing inequality in society.

The alternative vision is that of a strong democracy with facilitating leaders building civic competence (Barber 1998), where individuals speak out spontaneously against ordinary injustice (Rosenblum 1998), and where engaged citizens act in a spirit of social justice and equality, doing with one another, not for one another (Skocpol 1998). This is not a new vision for the United States, but it is one that represents a significantly different ideal of the democratic community, one of difference, connection, and equality (Gurin and Cornwell 1997). And the vision of a strong democracy may very well be one that is sustained by its citizens embracing community in small groups rather than enormous political organizations (Walzer 1998).

Intergroup dialogue is one significant and bold model of small groups of people coming together from various walks of life to build a strong democracy (Schoem 1995). Intergroup dialogue represents a grassroots effort that is a constructive response to the challenges facing our fragile democracy (Schoem 1991b). It is a positive effort on the part of the citizenry to take initiative and responsibility for talking about building a just, multicultural society (Du Bois and Hutson 1997).

In a sense, intergroup dialogue is a diverse twenty-first-century version of the homogeneous nineteenth-century town hall meeting: sleeves rolled up, talking directly, honestly, and sometimes quite harshly about the most difficult and pressing topics of the day, and then moving forward together with solutions to strengthen the community and the nation. It is local hands-on work to build community in schools, in neighborhoods, in the workplace, in government. However, in the age-old New England-style town hall meeting, there was an assumption of homogeneity of experience, including religion, race, and common goals and values among community members who came together to deliberate differences of opinion and resolve problems. This homogeneity, coupled with common problems and hardships (and even common enemies), served to maintain social cohesion among community members as they shared differences of opinion. Although intergroup dialogues can be arranged to address problems that must be resolved across groups, unlike a town hall meeting, there is no assumption of homogeneity or common goals among different group members. In fact, the assumption is that members who come together in a dialogue likely will have different sociohistorical legacies steeped in intergroup antagonisms due to unequal social relations, hold stereotypical views of each others’ behaviors and values, and question whether they are members of the same community (Zúñiga et al. 1996).

This is the reality of many of the social differences that permeate our contemporary societal institutions (schools and colleges) and diverse communities. Thus, an important starting point for any intergroup dialogue is the assumption and acknowledgment of group differences. Through discussion, dialogue participants begin to understand why there may be group differences as well as to see that group members are more divergent in opinion and experience than group "stereotypes" convey (Lopez, Gurin, and Nagda 1998). Participants may begin to see that these differences deserve respect and that they are not as divisive or incompatible as they seemed on the surface. Eventually such contact and discussion can lead to the discovery of commonality of goals and values, which can lead to coalitions toward action on a community problem. However, this can only occur after a long process and hard work (Schoem and Stevenson 1990; Schoem 1995).

Many community groups and institutions have turned to intergroup dialogue as a means of addressing today’s conflicts and advancing institutional values and culture (Promising Practices 1997). By itself, intergroup dialogue won’t solve all of our nation’s problems. But the open and honest exchange and serious face-to-face engagement that represents good dialogue provides the best opportunity to engage in the practice of deliberative democracy in order to address our institutional and national concerns. To choose not to join the process of intergroup dialogue when that opportunity is available would seem a certain path to worsening relations across group boundaries, leading to increasingly dangerous, even explosive ways of dealing with conflicts in our communities and in our nation.

And change is taking place. In our schools and colleges, children, teenagers, and young adults are coming together in dialogue-based programs to fight the tide of prejudice, separation, and injustice. They revisit their exclusive friendship patterns, challenge the status quo of socially biased and inequitable paradigms in school, and construct a vision for their futures that will take them, we hope, beyond the structural barriers that have marked the lives of the generations that have preceded them. In our communities, private citizens and civic leaders are coming together to work through neighborhood, marketplace, and governmental issues of concern to all, making sure that all voices are heard and represented in problem solving, decision making, and plans for the future. In the workplace, too, corporate leaders and line workers are engaging in difficult conversations about race and other intergroup relations. These dialogues are
intended to build upon the rapidly changing demographic profile of American workers and corporate management to ensure profitability at home and in the global marketplace.

An indication of the powerful potential of intergroup dialogue is that it is sometimes used by powerful groups in a cynical or manipulative way in order to delay or cool out protest and civic participation. The negative use of intergroup dialogue is intended to encourage groups to focus strictly on the dialogue process rather than on substantive, structural issues; to emphasize talk above, and in place of, action; to focus exclusively on celebration rather than on power; and to frame issues restrictively as individually driven, rather than as a part of social group dynamics and social causation.

What Is Intergroup Dialogue?

Intergroup dialogue is a form of democratic practice, engagement, problem solving, and education involving face-to-face, focused, facilitated, and confidential discussions occurring over time between two or more groups of people defined by their different social identities.

1. Dialogue is a process, not an event. Dialogue takes place over time. It requires a commitment on the part of participants to listen, challenge, reflect, and continue to talk with one another. A dialogue that continues over weeks or months allows participants to work through stages of growth, change, conflict, friendship, and anger, uncovering new layers of understanding and insight (Adams, Bell, and Griffin 1997). The depth of meaning, the nuance of difference, and the fulfillment of connection and sharing only come through extended discussion. As trust between participants grows and is tested, people feel freer to probe issues, challenge self and others, express anger, offer comfort, and see beyond group boundaries to both structural conditions and intragroup concerns (Lopez, Gurin, and Nagda 1998).

Dialogue exercises and techniques also can be adapted to enhance and enrich other institutional activities, although they should not be confused with distinct intergroup dialogues (Adams, Bell, and Griffin 1997; Cox and Beale 1997; Schoem 1995). The college seminar class can truly become a setting for active, engaged learning with text and fellow students through incorporation of dialogue techniques. Faculty development activities and human resource workshops, social studies classes and student organizations, administrative policy meetings, staff training sessions, and commu-

nity organization meetings can be transformed through the adaptation of dialogue activities for those settings.

2. Dialogue is about relationship building and thoughtful engagement about difficult issues. Dialogue involves in-depth conversations about competing perspectives. It requires face-to-face engagement and attention to relationship building across groups, within groups, and between individuals (Dalton 1995; Hubbard 1997). In addition, the purpose of dialogue, unlike debate, is not to declare winners and losers at the end of the day, but rather to engender deeper and broader understandings and insights, oftentimes leading to action, among all participants.

Intergroup dialogues can take place in many settings in schools, colleges, communities, and the workplace. They can include students, teachers, staff and administration, citizens and citizen groups, community and governmental leaders and their constituents, clerical staff, line workers, management and professional staff, and corporate CEOs.

Dialogues should be small, about twelve to eighteen participants, in order to increase the opportunity to build more trusting relationships, encourage more engaged interaction, provide greater safety and confidentiality, and make better use of the limited time (Nagda, Zúñiga, and Sevig 1995). With highly skilled facilitation, it also is possible, though not generally desirable because of the difficulty involved, to conduct dialogues with more participants.

Intergroup dialogue exercises and techniques can be constructively used to encourage in-depth interaction and conversation with groups ranging from thirty to three hundred participants. But in most cases these should not be considered dialogues per se; they are more like town hall meetings. These larger events also serve a very important purpose of bringing people together for focused and engaged discussion. However, town hall meetings are different from intergroup dialogues. Finally, gatherings of five hundred to ten thousand people or more about topics of race relations or intergroup dialogue can also be educational and even provocative for those in attendance, using dynamic speakers and panels, multimedia presentations, and performances. Nevertheless, however beneficial they may be, these events should not be confused with intergroup dialogues as described here.

3. Dialogue requires an extended commitment. Implicit in the definition of dialogue is the notion of a sustained activity (Sherman et al. 1998). Dialogue is more likely to be meaningful and successful when participants agree to participate for more than a few meetings. With commit-
ment, people realize they can confront tough issues and know the conversation will continue and move forward the following week with the group intact. When people participate in an extended dialogue, they begin to realize that it is only through a long-term commitment that our racial and other divisions will be fully addressed. Over an extended time, trust slowly builds in the group to allow for more frank and difficult discussion (Schoem and Stevenson 1990).

The length of dialogues can vary widely, usually in categories of weekly meetings over three weeks, six weeks, three to six months, or a year or more. Our preference is for regular meetings of the dialogue group. Dialogues that meet just a few times can be intense and powerful, but most often fall short of the success of long-term engagement. Some dialogues may be organized in longer time blocks, such as intensive weekend retreats, and they may be deeply meaningful and even transformative. Nevertheless, while seeking a good balance between the numbers of meeting hours and the interval between meetings, we still value the commitment to dialogue over at least several weeks of time for the following reasons: (1) it allows for building more trusting relationships, (2) it provides time to process issues between sessions, (3) it permits attention to the complex layers of issues, (4) it provides opportunity for outside reading related to the topic, and (5) it teaches that change requires long-term commitment.

Those who organize dialogue-type discussions that meet once or twice also may find intense and often very positive reactions from participants. However, meeting just once or twice, in our minds, constitutes an "introduction to dialogue" rather than a true dialogue experience. These short-term experiences offer an opportunity to expose individuals and groups to the value of the dialogue process and techniques, but there are no shortcuts to the benefits of long-term engagement and commitment.

4. Dialogue takes place face-to-face. Face-to-face engagement is necessary to build and maintain the trust, confidentiality, and openness of the group. Without face-to-face interaction it is much more difficult to listen carefully, engage ideas and participants fully, and develop meaningful relationships. Meeting face-to-face also is required to create the safe environment needed for building trust and confidentiality for dialogue (Zúñiga et al. 1995). There is an important sense of "place" that is created when groups in dialogue come together over an extended time. Intergroup dialogue simply can't happen with hundreds of participants.

One of the key components of intergroup dialogue is its emphasis on listening (Guarasci and Cornwell 1997). While many dialogue participants are ready to tell their story, air their grievances, and explain their perspective, it is the emphasis on active listening that makes this process distinctive. People are always ready to talk, and they do, but there are few instances in which people listen, and listen intently, to their talk. Through the open acknowledgement of the importance of listening and, more importantly, the use of structured exercises that force and reinforce an emphasis on listening, dialogue participants finally begin to "hear" and understand one another's stories and perspectives. This experience is not only eye-opening to the listeners, who quickly find themselves deeply engaged in meaningful and forceful conversation, but it is equally valuable to the speakers, who almost always are struck by the difference that is made when another person actively and seriously listens to one's words.

With the advent of the internet there is increasing interest in virtual dialogue. Some find that virtual dialogue can complement and extend the work of an existing face-to-face dialogue, but the internet is fraught with problems of privacy and confidentiality and, alone, does not lend itself well to building trust and community among people engaging long-standing issues of conflict. Attempts at stand-alone, virtual intergroup dialogue are not recommended. On-line and other forms of distance communication can provide important support and can enhance and extend the value of a good dialogue, but face-to-face meetings will always be at the center of intergroup dialogue (Schoem 1998).

5. Dialogue takes place best in an atmosphere of confidentiality, and issues of sponsorship and context are important to its success. Precisely because dialogue is about relationship building, it requires confidence that what people say in the dialogue will not be reported to nonparticipants. A dialogue takes place in the moment, and what one says and hears is not for the purpose of gaining advantage with anyone outside the dialogue group. Practices such as revealing private comments to friends outside the group, attempting dialogue in big crowds, or looking for sound bites and photo opportunities for the six o'clock news don't make for good dialogue. In a dialogue, listening is essential, and saying words from both the heart and the mind is paramount (Schoem 1995).

Dialogues are most often organized because there are new or longstanding conflicts between more powerful groups and those groups in subordinate positions, most often arising from an imbalance of power and privilege between them. A dialogue may be sponsored by both or all of the parties involved, by a third-party convenor acceptable to all participants,
or by a single, "interested" party. The trust level of participants entering into the dialogue, and thus the subsequent success of the dialogue, is more likely to be deepened through cosponsorship or third-party sponsorship. Sometimes, however, it is only possible to obtain sponsorship from a single, "interested" party, and though more difficult, trust can be built and the dialogue still can be successful. In these cases it is important for information about sponsorship to be brought to the attention of all participants and discussed openly.

Among the dialogue participants themselves, there obviously also are issues of power relations to address. If participants come from the same organization, for example, a business, a college, or a school, to discuss issues of race or gender, there will be different intergroup dynamics when the participants hold the same status (all vice presidents, all faculty, all tenth graders) than when there are hierarchical relationships in the group. With considerable care such power imbalances can be addressed, but one must be very attentive to these dynamics and the possible ramifications in the setting outside the dialogue group.

The larger context in which dialogues take place influences the individual dialogue itself and, in turn, reflects the long-term impact of dialogue activity on the institutional or community setting. A distinct dialogue program that exists in a school, college, community, or corporation is more likely to have a secure presence, institutional commitment, and satisfactory resources than any one-time workshop or activity based on individual initiative. In some cases, an organization may make a strong commitment but choose to infuse dialogue-like activities throughout the workforce or curriculum instead of creating a distinct program. When dialogue "events" are offered as stand-alone events or part of a retreat or orientation program, although useful, they are more likely to be short term and without opportunity for follow-up.

6. Dialogues often may focus on race, but they also address multiple issues of social identity that extend beyond race. Intergroup dialogue brings together two or more groups of people with issues of conflict or potential for conflict (Zúñiga and Chesler 1995; Gadlin 1994). A dialogue may bring together Blacks and Whites, Hispanics and Native Americans, Christians, Moslems, Hindus, and Jews, women and men, multiracial/multiethnic people, or gays, lesbians, and heterosexuals (Zúñiga et al. 1995). There are also intragroup dialogues that bring together several subgroups within a larger identity group, such as Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Cuban Americans, or Orthodox Jews and Reform Jews, or Asian/Pacific Americans of many different ethnic backgrounds. Dialogues also can bring together a wide range of community leaders from many backgrounds. Multigroup dialogues result in outcomes just as valuable as more topically focused dialogues or dialogues with just two groups, but may take longer to accomplish their goals (Schoen 1995). Because there are so many forces that constitute our individual identity and self, the most engaged dialogue participants will likely bring into any topic issues of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and religion at some point in the discussion.

Intergroup dialogue contrasts with interpersonal dialogue just as intergroup relations differ from interpersonal relations, or an autobiography may differ from an autobiography. In the United States an ideology of individualism tends to be overt. A definitive feature of intergroup dialogue, however, is its occurrence among people who are trying to see and speak of themselves as members of their groups, rather than as sole individuals. It is not that the individuals are to be considered representatives of their groups, but intergroup dialogue is sensitive to and expressive of participants' backgrounds in the values, customs, philosophies and beliefs, rites of passage, celebrations, struggles, and histories of their respective groups and communities. By actively considering groups and their interactions in the lives of participating individuals, intergroup dialogue can analyze structural relations among groups in society. These features of intergroup dialogue are stated as well as examined in many ways in what follows in this volume.

Intergroup dialogues cross the boundaries of individual and group identities and experiences. It is important for each participant (1) to acknowledge his or her social group identities and those groups' roles in society and, (2) at the same time, to affirm his or her own individuality within and across social groups, and (3) to recognize commonalities across social groups. A dialogue that focuses exclusively on the individual and intrapsychic processes ignores social structural conditions of power and place in society. At the same time, dialogue processes that ignore participants' individual identities by insisting exclusively upon group and/or subgroup identities also deny the unique character of people's lives and diminish opportunities for personal growth and change. It is important to keep in mind that what is addressed in a dialogue is an integration of individual, group, and societal issues and identities and, therefore, the participants may experience the dialogue as a mix of intellectual, political, conceptual, relational, and intrapsychic processes. However, intergroup
dialogue groups should never be confused with therapy groups (Schoom and Stevenson 1990; Schoom 1995). Any individual who confuses these purposes or who wishes to use dialogue for therapy should be advised of the significant distinctions and referred elsewhere for counseling if that is what is desired.

7. Dialogue focuses on both intergroup conflict and community building. It is intense, difficult work, and only occasionally is it a “feel good” experience. The constructive use and management of conflict for building community and addressing issues of social justice is a core focus of intergroup dialogue. Clearly, conflict avoidance is not one of the goals of intergroup dialogue. Dialogue groups provide an opportunity for participants to engage issues of conflict in a safe, structured environment (Hubbard 1997). It is this rare opportunity to engage conflict safely and fully with groups that have histories of distance, separation, and power imbalance that often evokes great interest in building community among participants. Community building requires time for addressing conflict, time for celebration of both commonalities and differences, and attention to issues of power and social structures through problem solving and change making. Joint celebration across groups of holidays, foods, and accomplishments is an important social experience but does not alone constitute intergroup dialogue.

As individuals, we Americans are amazingly adept at not talking about race with people across different racial backgrounds and at talking superficially rather than substantively. As members of different social identity groups, we live in separate worlds from one another (Schoom 1991b). When people come together in dialogue, they first have to overcome this history of keeping apart from others, and they quickly confront the barriers that divide them, including their lack of awareness, skills, and knowledge. None of this is easy. People often feel anxious, fearful, and vulnerable during the dialogue. At the same time, as people realize how much progress they can make through dialogue, the hard work feels good and the relationships that develop can be heartwarming and enduring.

8. Dialogues are led by skilled facilitators. Dialogues are a difficult, complex social process, and without the careful attention of skilled facilitators they can go badly (Nagda, Zúñiga, and Sevig 1995). Facilitators can and should come from every sector of society. However, dialogue does require facilitation by skilled individuals, and the importance of in-depth training to develop such skills cannot be underestimated (Adams, Bell, and Griffin 1997; Zúñiga et al. 1998). Attempts to shortcut the training process are likely to decrease the chances for the success of the dialogue group. Although not every organization or group wanting to organize dialogue groups has the resources to offer in-depth training, the principle that more training is better than less training applies in most cases.

There is considerable value in having the social group of participants represented by cofacilitators who can model constructive dialogic processes. Facilitators who also are peers of the participants offer them a greater sense of ownership and understanding in the dialogue, and often allow for greater engagement and relationship building. Successful cofacilitation requires careful coordination and preparation, constant review, and regular feedback.

9. Dialogue is about inquiry and understanding and the integration of content and process. The dialogue process involves challenging ideas, listening to other viewpoints, and gaining new insights. It requires intellectual, social, and personal reflection. It asks that one attempt to see issues from another’s perspective and often to develop the ability to hold multiple and sometimes competing perspectives at the same time. Participants learn as much about their own personal beliefs, group identity, and their group’s social history as they learn about other group(s), and they often report learning more than they do in school or any work setting (Franklin 1996; Zúñiga et al. 1998). This is because dialogue depends on the extended presence and engagement of a diverse group of individuals to make real what otherwise may be presented as “background information.” They realize that groups are not monolithic and that there are considerable intragroup differences. They confront and leave behind the narrow lens through which they have previously viewed the world around them. They often come to recognize the inadequacies of their own schooling and the limitations of growing up in segregated neighborhoods and living in a segregated society (Hurtado 1996; Osajima 1995; Schoom 1999a, 1995).

Intergroup dialogue at its best integrates elements of content and process. There must be opportunity for presentation and discussion of information, theory, and perspectives of students and scholars in the field. Facilitators must not only be skilled in group processes and have a high degree of self-awareness of social identity group issues, but must also be knowledgeable about the content area of the dialogue. To proceed without content from the facilitator as well as outside readings and resources allows participants to go forward in the dialogue with the possibility that misinformation is being introduced and reinforced without question or challenge, and it allows individual experience to far outweigh social and
historical experience. At the other extreme, by no means does a traditional lecture format constitute a dialogue. There needs to be a careful balance between content and process.

10. Dialogue involves talking, but taking action often leads to good talking, and dialogue often leads to action. At its very essence, intergroup dialogue involves communication, and it emphasizes communication primarily in the form of talking with one another. Many people find that communication is enhanced when groups of people work together on a joint task or project. Having a concrete experience in common allows people to bring the real-world activity of the task to enrich the dialogue and allows the frank discourse of the dialogue to enhance the work of the project.

In addition, some groups may intentionally enter into a dialogue to advance their work together, and some individuals may decide either at the outset or at the conclusion of a dialogue to continue to be together by engaging in a collaborative action project to effect social change. Policymakers or community groups are more likely to make informed decisions and work more cooperatively after having participated in related intergroup dialogues. In cases of action following dialogue, the foundation of dialogic processes already established will inform the continued collaborative processes of the action project.

Dialogues often are organized so that there is talk only. In these cases there may be important new understandings and deep insights gained, but participants may never move beyond the intellectual and abstract to personal change and collective action based on the dialogue discussions. Dialogues also can be tied to an action project as part of the conceptualization of the dialogue or in response to discussions within the dialogue or even as an outcome of the dialogue. These might include community service projects, social change projects, or coalition-based actions. These dialogues address the concern raised above regarding dialogues with talk only but, depending on the action taken, may also involve some personal and collective risk.

Intergroup Dialogue for a Just and Diverse America

Democracy is a powerful but fragile political arrangement, requiring careful maintenance, regular nurturance, and continuing advancement and improvement in the areas of social justice and equality. The American ideal, that people from all backgrounds can join together to live in a just and democratic society, will become even more of a necessity for our democratic survival as we proceed into the new century. Our national identity increasingly will depend on the social, cultural, intellectual, and economic contributions of citizens from every social identity group.

Intergroup dialogue is a positive and powerful process in which different groups come together to discuss issues of community and conflict. Our societal task is not to end or resolve all conflicts, but to examine and understand conflict so communities can live together productively, even harmoniously, with conflict. Conflict is a natural phenomenon, one that exists in both good and bad relationships at multiple levels (Chesler 1993). If we can't talk openly with one another in a sustained way, we have little hope of achieving our national ideal, let alone maintaining the progress we have made thus far.

Maurianne Adams (1997) offers a valuable overview of the broader context of approaches to social justice education developed over many decades since the 1940s. Intergroup dialogues draw in a variety of ways from all these models. These models include laboratory and intergroup education (Lippitt 1949), human relations, intergroup, and multicultural education (Sleeter and Grant 1994; Schoem et al. 1995), cross-cultural and international training (York 1994), experiential education (Joplin 1995), black studies and ethnic studies (Cole 1991), feminist pedagogies (Howe 1984), and critical pedagogies and liberatory education (Freire 1970). The intergroup dialogue model draws on all these important social justice education practices, including lessons drawn from social and cognitive development models.

Learning how to build and strengthen a just, democratic society that comprises a variety of cultural and racial groups does not take place without vehicles for learning, through community groups, high-quality education, and supportive institutional and corporate structures. Most Americans grow up in communities segregated by race, class, and religion and have little experience personally or through their schooling with people from backgrounds that differ from their own. Intergroup misunderstanding and unproductive conflict on personal and institutional levels are pervasive when members of these different groups come together at some point in schools, in the community, or in the workplace.

The global economy requires our citizens to have cross-cultural competence to remain competitive (Ellior and Gerard 1998). Yet without the opportunity for dialogue, most of our young people lack experience even
with their fellow citizens in the United States from different racial groups, let alone people from other countries. Many of the young people entering our colleges and professional schools have grown up in gated communities and segregated schools, and they continue that pattern of separation at college through membership in monoracial and monclass fraternities and sororities. Through intergroup dialogue, students not only experience an extended and substantive interracial exchange, but they learn to traverse racial boundaries and build new and more inclusive “comfort zones.”

In the intergroup dialogue, participants not only learn about the “other,” but they learn just as much about their own group, about intra-group issues, and about themselves as individuals. In fact, one of the most compelling facets of dialogue is that while participants join in order to address issues between their own group and another group, they usually find that they learn as much about themselves as about the other group (Franklin 1996; Schoem 1997; Zúñiga et al. 1998). In part this occurs because unexplored areas of commonality across groups are identified, but also because participants often find it difficult to answer informatively questions about their own group from a sincere and interested “other.” This results in a process of self-reflection and new and renewed exploration of one’s own social identities.

Intergroup dialogues also move the central and often exclusive interracial focus from Black and White to the rich and complex racial mix that America comprises (Takaki 1993; Schoem 1991b). Although the dialogue framework may remain the same, it is very clear that the range of relationships requires multiple and varied dialogues. Further, any notion that a dialogue can maintain fixed boundaries in focusing on a single relationship, for example, race or gender, is quickly disposed of as issues of multiple and intersecting identities and varied positions of power emerge in discussion (McIntosh 1992; Lorde 1992). In addition, though the public focus of intergroup dialogue has often been about race, dialogues are often centered on other issues as well, such as religion, immigration, sexual orientation, gender, economic class, and national and international identities.

Within the confines of the dialogue, all participants have equal status (Stephan and Stephan 1996; Zúñiga et al. 1998). This fact requires participants to confront the possibilities of a relationship, a community, and a nation in which all people have equal standing. It encourages open discussions of equality, justice, and freedom both on a theoretical basis and a very real, practical basis. When people from different and historically unequal footing come together as equals to confront past and present conflict, they move to the very issues of democracy in the United States. How will communities of difference live and work together? What are the common bases upon which the national social contract can be made acceptable and sustained for all groups of people? What does a multicultural school, university, community, workplace, government, society look like, and how does it function day to day? How does one go about changing organizational and institutional structures to support a new vision of a just, diverse America? Progress on these questions, which are at the heart of American democracy, constitutes the promise of intergroup dialogue.

REFERENCES


Intergroup Dialogue
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