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Dialogue on Campus: An Overview of Promising Practices

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Abstract

Higher education institutions are recognizing the value of dialogue in engaging diverse perspectives and experiences while providing the necessary skills and knowledge for students to become effective citizens. Colleges and universities are incorporating the theory and practice of dialogue across different dimensions of the curriculum, co-curriculum, pedagogy, and administration and governance. Examples include nation-wide intergroup dialogue programs, community standards processes in residence halls, and institution-wide decision making on curricula. Seen as a whole, these and other examples provide a vision for a comprehensive approach to integrating dialogue on campuses.

Keywords

higher education, dialogue, deliberation, deliberative democracy

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Scholars have long argued that one of the missions of higher education is to prepare citizens to participate in democracy (Dewey, 1916, p. 3; Gutmann, 1987; Newman, 1985). Many institutions of higher education define their core mission as “graduating the citizens of tomorrow,” “developing world citizens,” or something similar.

In today’s diverse and transient society, citizen participation in public problem-solving is more complex than ever. The consideration of multiple viewpoints to come up with solutions a community will accept now requires that people engage constructively despite differences in race, religion, socio-economic class, geographic distribution, or other social divides. Addressing public issues ranging from local safety to global climate change requires an engaged citizenry. This makes the university’s mission of “graduating the citizens of tomorrow” no easy task.

To meet these challenges, universities are refining their expectations of what college students need to know, value, and be able to do -- the core competencies required of a college graduate. While core competencies and general education curricula vary by institution, some common competencies exist across a wide swath of higher education environments. Core competencies in civic engagement include valuing diversity of communities and cultures, communications skills to express, listen, and adapt to establish relationships and further civic action, and understanding civic contexts and structures. An example of a learning outcome for the latter is “civic contexts/structures (e.g. the ability to collaboratively work across and within community contexts and structures to achieve a civic aim)” (Rhoads, 2010, p. 43). To take another example, core competencies in intercultural knowledge include cultural self-awareness, empathy, and knowledge of cultural world views and frameworks. A learning outcome of the latter is the “knowledge of cultural worldview frameworks (e.g. demonstrates an understanding of the elements important to members of another culture in relation to its history, values, politics, communication styles, economy, or beliefs and practices)” (Rhoads, 2010, p. 45).

Such core competences require that students engage with each other and talk despite their differences. To help students know, value, and do this, universities are increasingly turning to dialogue processes. Programs using dialogue are designed to teach skills in conflict transformation, collaboration, active listening, intercultural understanding and public reasoning, and this article provides an overview of such programs on campuses across the United States.

Defining Dialogue and Conflict Transformation

The dialogue process, in essence, is a collaborative and inclusive approach that engages community members in an effort to hear diverse perspectives and develop shared understanding. Implied in this process are two ideas: dialogue is the space between people or the *vessel* or container in which communication flows (Bohm, 1996) and interaction with another person must be founded in a deep respect or sacred honoring of the other person (Buber, 1970).

In this article the term “dialogue” signifies group communication processes in which active facilitation promotes a conversation among people with different social identities or viewpoints for the purpose of a deeper understanding of those different view and experiences. Dialogue is often the foundation for public deliberation. For example community dialogue and listening might be the foundation for public problem solving about a local power plant. Similarly on a campus, dialogue might be the foundation for a deliberative community forum to address disputes about race based vs. legacy based affirmative action policies. In cases such as these, the dialogue process is the precursor and lays the ground work. Dialogue enables the inclusive and respectful public decision-making on which a diverse and deliberative democracy rests.

Dialogue provides the opportunity for participants to come together, and reflect on personal and culturally influenced assumptions, judgments, and thought processes. The dialogue process provides the opportunity to examine these thought processes and assumptions, thereby transforming the understanding of one’s self, others, relationships, and the social systems in which these exist and interact. Dialogic interactions can push argumentative stances aside and allow shared understandings to emerge. From this shared understanding (i.e. transformed perspectives), we begin to construct inclusive and democratic problem-solving.

Table 1, adapted from the work of Daniel Yankelovich (1999), provides a helpful contrast between dialogue and more common confrontational ways people communicate.

Table 1. A comparison of debate and dialogue.

Debate	Dialogue
This is where I want the meeting to go.	Let’s see what we can come up with.
Speak as representatives of a group.	Speak as individuals from their own unique experience.

Unwavering commitment to one's own views and ideas.	Open to hearing and understanding other perspectives.
Trying to convince others to see the situation from your perspective or to agree with you.	Asking questions to understand other people's point of view.
Combative, where participants attempt to prove the other side wrong.	Collaborative, where participants work together toward common understanding.
Assuming there is a right answer, and you have it.	Assuming that there are multiple perspectives and that integrating these perspectives provides a more effective solution.
Listening to find flaws and counterarguments.	Listening to understand and find meaning.
Critiquing others' views and ideas.	Reexamining all views, ideas, and assumptions –including one's own.
Seeking closure with agreement to your view and ideas.	Discovering new options.

The process of conflict transformation, like the process of dialogue, has implications for a deliberative democracy. When two or more individuals or groups have divergent interests or goals, some disagreement or conflict is natural. Yet conflicts on any level (e.g. intrapersonal, interpersonal, or intergroup), if not approached constructively, can be debilitating to social and organizational relationships. Conflict transformation may use dialogue as a means to understanding the opposing views and as a precursor to mediation and negotiation. Hearing all sides of an issue is more than just a route to negotiating viable solutions. It is also a path to create peace among disparate voices so that misunderstanding, anger and community disruption can be avoided. When handled sensitively, conflict can be a powerful and necessary stimulus for change in social systems and structures – including institutions of higher education.

Facilitated dialogue can be used to transform conflicts although there are other approaches as well (e.g., non-violent communication, mediation, and ceremony). Dialogue transforms conflict and is especially helpful in generating new solutions that meet the interests and needs of the community. For example,

when faculty members decide to revise their promotion and tenure process, there will be divergent perspectives. Through dialogue, conflict transformation and deliberation processes, the institution can leverage these diverse perspectives in a constructive way that allows for a deeper and broader understanding to emerge. This emergence of “new” knowledge leads to creating a more effective promotion and tenure system that works for the institution and the people involved.

The Practice of Dialogue on Campus

With the above descriptions of dialogue and conflict transformation as background, this article focuses on the practice of these concepts in four areas on college campuses: (1) the curriculum, (2) the co-curriculum, (3) pedagogy, and (4) administration and governance. Each is discussed below.

Curricular Innovations

Intergroup dialogue is an example of deliberative democracy that has been adopted by colleges and universities. Several dialogue programs have been established on campuses across the United States. Universities have established their own programs as well as adapting community-based programs from organizations such as the National Issues Forum, Everyday Democracy and the International Institute of Sustained Dialogue. Whether developed in-house or in collaboration with a community organization, formal campus programs often focus on issues of intergroup relations, diversity, and social justice. Several colleges have developed formal dialogue programs through various campus structures and venues (Schoem & Hurtado, 2001).

The Multiversity Intergroup Dialogue Project brings together teachers and researchers from across ten institutions of higher education to develop best practices in intergroup dialogue including the development and implementation of a shared curriculum as well as to understand the benefits of student learning through intergroup dialogue (Gurin, Nagda, & Zuniga, 2004).

The University of Michigan is a member of this consortium and has created the Program on Intergroup Relations as part of their undergraduate curriculum (www.igr.umich.edu). The program, in coordination with the Division of Student Affairs, and the College of Literature, Science, and Arts, offers courses that are structured to help students explore different social identity groups such as culture, race, religion, gender, class, sexual orientation, and national origin. Providing opportunities to earn college credit, structured dialogue courses push students to interact with those outside their own social groups, and allows for the creation of deeper, empathic relationships to develop. These transformed relationships and newly created understanding of one another, and of oneself, can have a profound impact on creating a positive campus climate. Recent research on curricular dialogue has shown that such models increase intergroup

understanding, relationships, collaboration and engagement (Nagda, Gurin, Sorenson, & Zuniga, 2009).

Wake Forest University's Democracy Fellows Program incorporates dialogue and deliberation into a student cohort's classroom experience. In this program, using the National Issues Forum model, students learned the skills of dialogue and deliberation and honed these skills through the exploration of various topics. Researchers found that students developed openness to diverse points of view, the ability and motivation to apply deliberation and dialogue skills to situations outside of the classroom, and planned to continue using these skills upon graduating from Wake Forest (Harriger & McMillan, 2008)

Divisive debates occurring in the public arena can make positive changes seem impossible (Dukes, Stephens, & Piscolish, 2008). Not surprisingly, the study of conflict transformation, fundamental to deliberative democracy, is being incorporated into a variety of programs across academic disciplines. Law, education, public affairs, international studies, business, and other fields are integrating conflict transformation into their curriculum. For example the Harvard Law School trains students and professionals in fields of law, education and business (www.pon.harvard.edu).

At the same time, there are a growing number of stand-alone conflict transformation programs taking root across the United States. Courses in these programs cover a broad range of topics such as intercultural, international, interpersonal, organizational, community, ethnic, environmental, and religious conflict transformation. For example Columbia University houses the International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution which offers courses in conflict resolution, cooperation and social justice (www.tc.columbia.edu/ICCR) and the Fielding Graduate Institute offers a program in Dialogue, Deliberation and Public Engagement (www.fielding.edu/programs/ce/ddpe).

Dialogue in the Co-Curriculum

The co-curriculum is home to a number of dialogue practices as well. There are dialogues in response to bias incidents; residence hall dialogues on current events; dialogue groups after a speaker or film; student conduct and restorative justice practices, residence hall community standards, and peer mediation training practices, just to name a few.

For example, in the residence halls, dialogue is central to creating successful community standards. Led by trained resident assistants, all students in their respective residence halls collaboratively develop community standards which provide a shared understanding of the expectations and responsibilities of each student and the community as a whole. The dialogue process is used by

students in both developing the community standards, and as a process to help resolve conflicts that occur when the standards have been transgressed.

Dialogue, in this setting, creates an opportunity for students and the community to better understand the effects that their behavior has on others and the deeper needs and values that motivate individuals and groups. Through facilitated conversations, students negotiate their experiences, different perspectives, and values to create a shared understanding of how to live with one another. Instead of a traditionally punitive approach, the approach of community standards and dialogue creates a transformative learning experience that fosters self reflection, empathy, social responsibility, cross-cultural communication, and constructive conflict transformation.

Recent research on co-curricular dialogue models suggest that civic engagement outcomes ranging from cognitions and behaviors to attitudes, skills, and hopes and plans for the future, are influenced by undergraduate dialogue initiatives. It also suggests that such civic outcomes last years past graduation (Diaz, 2009).

Numerous colleges and universities also employ peer mediation to help with campus conflicts. Students learn the mediation and facilitation skills necessary in helping transform intercultural, interpersonal, intergroup, and intragroup conflicts. Among many others, colleges and universities with such programs include University of Rhode Island, Syracuse University, Portland State University, University of Massachusetts Amherst, University of Louisville, Grinnell College, and Texas A&M (www.campus-adr.org).

Dialogue as Educational Pedagogy

Changed perspectives and more inclusive approaches emerge through such practices as conflict transformation, dialogue and public deliberation. Such a perspective change motivates more active civic engagement or the living of a life of commitment to a shared humanity (Parks Daloz, et al., 1996).

This approach to pedagogy draws from the idea that a critical consciousness cannot be developed from a curriculum that is disconnected to human lives (Freire, 1973), and that encountering a perspective different from one's own, triggers a discord between what one believes and the reality of the other person that one encounters. The discord from such an encounter provides an opportunity for one to question what one knows. Through deeper reflection on the perspective of the other and the resulting discord, a new understanding can emerge (Mezirow & Associates, 2000). This type of transformative learning as well as civic motivation are associated with moral and ethical development and are rooted in the critical self-reflection and construction of knowledge that occurs through collaborating with the other (Bruffee, 1993). The scholar-practitioners of Popular Education call this dialogic learning space, "a circle of learners" or "a

circle of culture” and avoids the term of “teacher”—instead calling those who facilitate learning “coordinators of discussion or debate and dialogue” (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 84).

There are many ways in which a professor can incorporate deliberative democracy and this type of transformative learning into educational practice. Such practice will in turn, help create an inclusive environment and teach students the skills of: listening to diverse perspectives and life experiences; examining personal preferences, biases, and assumptions; and creating a shared and more complex understanding of an issue.

Instead of convincing others of the “rightness” of their opinions, the practice of dialogue as pedagogy provides an alternative, where students (and professors) can ask each other and themselves reflective and transformational questions. Cranton (2006) suggests reflecting on such questions as:

1. Why do I believe this perspective is important?
2. Why do others believe that a certain perspective is important?
3. How did I come to think this way?
4. Why should I question this perception?
5. What are the social norms of my community of others’ communities?
6. How have these social norms been influential?
7. Why are these norms important?
8. What knowledge do I have?
9. Where did this knowledge come from?
10. What knowledge and experiences have I been exposed to?
11. How does this affect the way I see the world?

Dialogue about questions such as these, when effectively facilitated, promote self-reflection and opportunities for conflict transformation and learning. An important aspect of ensuring such effects is creating trust amongst students, and between students and the instructor. As a professor, one can begin the new term by asking students what it takes to establish trust in the classroom as a foundation to their learning. Questions can be proposed such as, “how do we respond when we disagree, have a different perspective, or have a different experience from the person who just spoke?” The ideas generated from this dialogue can be formed into a written agreement by the class. When tension or conflict occurs, students and instructors can refer back to this agreement to transform the situation. An agreement could include:

1. Listen actively to each other with attention and respect.
2. Do not interrupt and allow each person to represent her/his views fully.
3. Be sensitive to the amount of time each of us speaks.

4. Make an effort to understand the other person's experience.
5. Acknowledge the experience of others even though it may be different than your own.
6. Speak from your own experience, not as a representative of any group.

Universities are increasingly aligning their core curriculum with high impact practices (Kuh, 2008). Such practices include common intellectual experiences such as an all-freshmen class reading of a shared common reading and small group discussions; first year seminars and learning communities to discuss deep questions about life's purpose; collaborative projects which prepare students for the team work demanded of today's workforce; and service-learning which helps students situate their studies and engage with real life communities. Faculty have noted the ways in which dialogue helps create "spaces where people can safely remain open to new perspectives, be self-reflective, and examine their underlying assumptions" (Doherty, 2008, p. 84). High impact educational practices require dialogue as a fundamental means of engagement to help students learn to talk genuinely and respectfully with each other. Research suggests that such active learning where students engage with their peers, increases rates of student retention and student engagement (Kuh, 2008).

Dialogue in Administration and Governance

University administrative and governance processes can model and reflect an inclusive and engaged campus. Deliberative democracy allows for open communication, opportunities to create shared meaning, a course of action to transform interpersonal and intergroup conflicts constructively, and to develop creative and effective solutions. These qualities of open communication, shared meaning, conflict transformation, and developing effective solutions are fundamental in creating inclusive institutional structures and organizational processes that engage diverse perspectives.

In this manner, skillfully facilitated dialogue serves as a fundamental approach in implementing inclusive decision making. This means implementing dialogue, deliberation, and conflict transformation at regular meetings (e.g. departmental, staff, faculty, trustees, students, etc.), visioning and strategic planning sessions, as well as campus-wide assessment processes. Meetings and conversations conducted in this manner provide an environment where ideas, data, and perspectives are explored fully without defensiveness. And where views are fully heard and questions are posed to better understand the assumptions behind people's ideas. A dialogic approach increases the number of participants and perspectives involved. There is open, transparent communication about the issue and an effort to hear the views of all constituents. Whereas dialogic approaches in university administration can take time, using dialogue to address

critical issues can avoid time consuming repeated and even failed attempts to solve complex problems. Administrative decisions involving sensitive power dynamics (e.g. campus-community relations) or cross departmental endorsements (e.g. general education reform), have benefitted from a dialogic approach. Such processes are more likely to be successful and widely viewed as positive institutional change.

The Flint campus of the University of Michigan provides an illustration of using dialogue to further institutional transformation. There the campus engaged in a process-driven initiative on general education that involved the entire campus. Instead of attempting general education reform through traditional means of a single committee-created plan (or top-down approach), those involved made a pivotal decision to include the perspectives of students, staff, faculty, administrators, and the governing board. At every step of the way the process was reflective, open, and inclusive. They found that the insularity and the hindrance and lack of progress that usually comes from having only a handful of administrators or faculty making broad decisions, was overcome by involving a wide-range of perspectives. “Silos were dismantled, barriers were crossed, and the culture of secrecy and suspicion that pervaded the campus was transformed into one of openness, inclusiveness, collaboration, and engagement” (Gano-Phillips & Barnett, Spring, 2008, p. 44).

Barriers to using dialogue on campuses

With universities turning increasingly to dialogue practices on campus, the barriers to incorporating these practices must be identified as well. For senior administrators, dialogue rather than top-down decision-making can feel time-consuming. Student affairs practitioners and co-curricular advisors may feel anxious about a loss of control and unclear student learning outcomes. For faculty, insufficient facilitation skills or a lack of knowledge about rigorous pedagogies may prevent many from using dialogue in the classroom. Each of these barriers can be overcome through faculty and other professional development along with practice and reflection.

Conclusion

Scholars and practitioners frequently focus on civic outcomes such as new laws and new alliances in communities. While this is exceedingly important for civil discourse, public decision-making and good governance, deliberation may not be giving enough credit to dialogue -- the very foundation, communication exchange, and transformational nature of talking with another person. The dialogue process can surface the importance of respect, civility, intercultural understanding, connections, and breaking down barriers, which are preconditions to more tangible changes. Dialogue results in increased interpersonal awareness

and connections. Together the inquiry and transformational nature of dialogue along with the public exchange and decision making ensure that multiple and sometimes conflicting opinions are considered. Such a process can only strengthen the pursuit of an inclusive and just democracy.

This article has provided a brief overview of some of the educational approaches and practices of dialogue on American campuses. No doubt there are many other initiatives in the U.S. and abroad that reflect the qualities and goals of a deliberative democracy. From the curriculum to the co-curriculum and across high impact educational practices as well as governance initiatives, dialogue has taken root in the academy. As dialogue integrates into institutions of higher education, its theory and practices will continue to innovate, adapt and evolve to meet local, regional, national, and international needs. That's a good thing because our next generation of citizens will need the skills of dialogue to solve the biggest problems on our little planet.

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