

3 Dialogue in Action: Toward a Critical Pedagogy for Interfaith Education

By Nazia Islam, Tiffany Steinwert, and Diane Swords

“The future of the world depends on people of differing faiths developing the capacity to cooperate and work with each other and American higher education can have a significant part in building that capacity.” (Jacobsen and Jacobsen, 2012, p. 91)

Now more than ever interfaith education is a pressing imperative for higher education. As religious tensions rise in the United States and around the world, the need for critical and constructive pedagogies of interfaith education grows. Not only must students increase their own religious literacy to function in an increasingly religiously plural world, but they must also learn effective ways to communicate and collaborate across differences of faith and non-faith (Jacobsen and Jacobsen, 2012; Patel, 2012; Patel and Meyer, 2011). In a recent study of religion in higher education, Jacobsen and Jacobsen, assert, “paying attention to religion has the potential to enhance student learning and to improve higher education as a whole” (Jacobsen and Jacobsen, 2012, p. vii).

While colleges and universities have long instituted academic courses on world religions and have offered co-curricular experiences for interfaith dialogue, few institutions have developed academic opportunities that fuse religious literacy, interfaith dialogue and multi-faith action. This paper intends to explore the possibilities for such a course through a critical analysis of the Intergroup Dialogue model as a pedagogical tool for interfaith education among undergraduate students.

Interfaith education is called to several tasks at once. Not only must it foster religious literacy, but it must also nurture what scholar Suresh Canagarajah calls, “transactional conversations.” This type of mutual encounter leads to a dialogical theological engagement between students that transform attitudes and create space for authentic relationships across religious differences (Canagarajah, 2010, p.28). The Intergroup Dialogue pedagogical model offers the potential for just such experiences.

Intergroup dialogue (IGD) was developed at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor in the 1980s as a tool for engaging students in critical conversations about race and equality in America. This dialogue model combined sound pedagogical principles, academic knowledge, and empirical research to “bring together students of different social identities over a sustained period of time to understand their commonalities and differences, examine the nature and impact of societal inequalities, and explore ways of working together toward greater equality and justice” (Zuniga, Nagda, Chesler, & Cytron-Walker 2007, p.2). Dialogue classes are led by a pair of trained facilitators who share identities with members of the class. They follow a standardized curriculum that involves trust-building, understanding social identities, understanding social inequalities, dialoguing on “hot topics” and completing a collaborative project in small diverse groups.

IGD is distinguished by several important features. First, it addresses power relations and social structures. Second, personal experience is put into context of social institutions such that affective learning supports academic understandings of inequalities and vice versa. Also,

substantial focus is on the collaborative action projects which provide experience working for social change, and a sense of efficacy that students otherwise lack. “Intergroup dialogue provides an important opportunity to develop and practice the understanding and collaboration needed to address social group divisions and inequalities in educational contexts and communities” (Lopez and Zuniga 2010, p.41).

Cross-listed as a sociology, women and gender studies, and cultural foundations of education course offering, the pilot course employed the Intergroup Dialogue model to examine religious pluralism in the United States, the role of Christian privilege in religious oppression, and the potential of dialogue to bridge these and other intersecting identities. The course addressed religion as a personal and social identity, paying close attention to the intersections of racial, ethnic, gender, sexual orientation and national origin identities. To foster transactional conversations and relationships students engaged in two intensive group projects: a 10 day travel experience to London where they encountered lived religious pluralism in a global city and a semester long intergroup collaboration project in which they worked together across difference on a common project to foster social justice on campus.

While religious identity functions in many similar ways as racial and ethnic identities on which the IGD model was constructed, there remain salient differences. These differences provide points of reflection for our analysis. The paper explores the ways in which the IGD model facilitated interfaith education and the ways in which it may have hindered it. Specifically, this paper explores the differences in religious and racial/ethnic identity, the role of religious literacy in creating appropriate foundations for interfaith dialogue, the significance of theological knowledge in interfaith dialogue, the role of intra-faith conflict, and the impact of student faith development on the ability to engage in transactional interfaith dialogue. Through this analysis, the paper seeks to move toward a critical pedagogy of interfaith education that expands the IGD model as a vehicle for interfaith engagement in institutions of higher learning.

The three following essays are reflections on this pilot interfaith dialogue. The reflections explore the opportunities and challenges presented by employing the Intergroup Dialogue model (IGD) to explore religious pluralism. Jointly authored by a theologian, sociologist, and student representing three world religious traditions (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam), this paper explores interfaith pedagogy from multiple perspectives across discipline, role and religion. Offering insights from professors, religious leaders and student participants in the course, the paper aims toward the critical construction of a new pedagogy for engaging interfaith education that increases appreciable knowledge of diverse faith and non-faith traditions, builds relationships and partners students across difference in joint projects for the common good.

Diane Swords, Adjunct Faculty, Intergroup Dialogue, Sociology, and Women and Gender Studies at Syracuse University

Last spring, the Reverend Steinwert and I piloted a course called “Dialogue in Action: Faith Conflict and Community.” We followed the Intergroup Dialogue (IGD) model, designed to “examine the nature and impact of societal inequalities, and explore ways of working together toward greater equality and justice” (Zuniga, Nagda, Chesler, & Cytron-Walker 2007, p.2). **In this presentation we present three perspectives, those of the two co-facilitators and that of a student.**

I am a long-time facilitator of IGD courses, but I have no academic background in religion. I am a sociologist and a Jew. **I believe that sociologically the IGD model** is a compelling way to look at interfaith relations, in spite of some challenges.

I address four aspects of intergroup dialogue here: 1) communication skills; 2) identity and emotion in the classroom; 3) using a frame of privilege and oppression to examine power and inequality and 4) turning relationships into commitment to act for justice.

First, IGD teaches communication skills to have conversations about controversial and emotional issues in the classroom. Key skills are active listening, purposeful sending, empathy, and perspective taking.

One challenge we experience in all the dialogues is conflict avoidance. This is intensified in the interfaith dialogue, which, I suggest, may be due to a belief that religion requires “being nice”. We need to work on surfacing the conflict underneath our politeness and face it head-on.

We always bring all our identities into any classroom whether we intend to or not, but a second feature of IGD is that our identities are a resource for learning, and for developing relationships that lead to appreciation, commitment and action for justice.

IGD requires a teaching team (two co-facilitators who represent targeted and dominant identities related to the topic of the class). In race dialogues, as the facilitator of the dominant identity, I must reinforce understanding of white privilege. In interfaith dialogue, as a Jew, my marginalized identity complicates teaching about Christian privilege. I need my Christian co-facilitator to legitimate its existence.

Two challenges last semester focused on my identity: I believe the Jewish students internalized the societal images of them as wealthy and in some ways superior; and that they had not learned the history in which this semi-privilege has repeatedly led to persecution. I reacted to this both protectively and angrily, feeling that their attitude of entitlement endangers all Jews by creating animosity. First I must deal with my own feelings; and then we need to find resources to deepen awareness of history and intersectionality to help them disentangle their privileged and targeted identities.

A second challenge was that, though most students experienced the class as a safe space, it appears not to have been the case for one student who hesitated to share personal stories. We need to work to create a space where it is clear that all of us seek to use our privilege to be safe allies.

As mentioned, the IGD model frames issues of social conflict in terms of privileged and targeted identities. Understanding social structures explains conflicts that cannot be understood with an individualistic model, and suggests real solutions to social inequalities.

However, as with whites who have other targeted identities, it was difficult to help Christian students, especially those who do not fully identify as Christian, see ways they receive structural privilege. One student noted that she came to understand privilege only after converting from a privileged identity as a Christian to an “unprivileged” one as a pagan.

In most classes, students finish a whole semester without knowing their fellow students. **The IGD model supports students in developing personal relationships.** We build toward sharing personal stories in “testimonials” and by the 3rd or 4th week develop deep

bonds. One student observed that her classmates were her inspiration to work on the action project for social justice.

Tiffany Steinwert, Dean of Hendricks Chapel at Syracuse University

As Dean of Hendricks Chapel, I am charged with the holistic religious, spiritual, moral, and ethical education of students. A daunting task on its own, it becomes even more difficult situated within the Division of Student Affairs as a co-curricular option. In the past, we have engaged interreligious education mainly outside of the classroom. Last year to bridge the curricular/co-curricular divide, we piloted a course on faith in the IGD model. We hoped to integrate the academic frame of social justice education with the co-curricular aim of exploring faith as a salient identity among students from diverse faith and non-faith traditions.

Researching existing interfaith dialogue courses, we realized that while interreligious academic engagement was on the rise, there was no clear-cut model. We longed to find a curriculum that employed a social justice frame to bridge curricular and co-curricular conversations.

Our pilot is still a work in progress. Yet, what struck me most about our experience were the opportunities and challenges involved in addressing spiritual formation, Christian privilege, and the intersectionality of identity.

As a Christian pastor and theologian, I was particularly interested in how the course might engage students' spiritual formation. From my perspective, this type of existential questioning is a central task of higher education. It moves us from producing products (professionals for a capitalist job market) to engaged citizens for a more robust democracy.

In their application essays, students voiced a general interest in religious pluralism, though most claimed no faith identity for themselves. Their answers came as no surprise. Many of us are familiar with the statistics: 72% of young adults identify as "spiritual but not religious" and the largest growing religious affiliation in America today is "none." Left behind by religious institutions of the past, this generation finds itself bereft of opportunities to explore their own spiritual identities. James Fowler's Stages of Faith can be helpful here. Many students find themselves in the *"Individuative-Reflective"* stage struggling to understand and take personal responsibility for their beliefs.

The IGD model presupposes a foundational understanding of one's identity. Whether race and ethnicity, gender, sexuality, or class, these identities are often perceived as static (though, of course, in reality, we know they are not and students soon discover that). However, in traditional IGD classes, students come in having at least a foundational sense of who they believe they are. In the faith dialogue, it became clear that students did not.

The IGD model also presupposes the ability to listen and learn from one another. However, students felt as though they did not know enough about themselves and their traditions to be a resource for others. Dialogue suffered because there was not sufficient substantive religious understanding to provoke conversation. I do not think it was a simple problem of religious literacy. Although, that was part of the problem. Rather, I think students were so acutely aware of their own doubts that they felt disempowered to act as an authoritative voice. In addition, their fear of being perceived as ignorant, voiced by several of the students over the course of the class, inhibited their ability to ask questions of the other.

While I confess as a pastor and theologian, I yearned for more direct theo-babble, many students found the class a perfect crucible to examine themselves and engage others.

Using the lens of privilege to explore intergroup differences, IGD adds the critical dimension of power to the interfaith conversation. Moving beyond the acknowledgment of religious difference, IGD helps students explore concrete power differentials associated with religious diversity in America. Using the frame of Christian privilege, the course investigates how power functions and why religious identities matter. It moves students beyond the idea of religion as a personal matter, to understand it as a public identity that structures social, economic, and political access. Unmasking Christian dominance helps students see the saliency of religious diversity and the call to religious pluralism. It adds urgency to the conversation and offers students a structure for systemic change. The social justice frame engages students in working together across difference to dismantle instances of Christian privilege by moving from dialogue to action.

Since IGD draws on a wider discourse of identity, the class provided fertile soil for students to grapple with the intersectionality of multiple identities. All too often we treat religion and spirituality as separate from other identities, as if it is an extra-curricular aspect of our lives. Perhaps worse, is the conflation of religion and ethnicity reducing it to a cultural characteristic. The balance in higher education is difficult. However, IGD offers the opportunity to wrestle with the complex relationships of faith, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and class. Students discovered their faith was inextricably interwoven into the fabric of their other identities and that was good.

Nazia Islam, Syracuse University, Class of 2014

My faith is always on my mind. I've written about it before, and I will write about it again because it never quite stays the same. I continue to adhere and practice the same faith, Islam, but my understanding of it has evolved and gone through delicate transformations. Faith used to mean ritual to me – merely ritual. I recognize ritual is as a very important component in faith and religion but it's not the end of it. As I've grown and time proceeded and continues to proceed, my faith and conviction, like puff pastry, bakes from a single layer of raw dough and expands into elaborate and fine layers. For me currently, it's the meaning within the rituals and scripture about how I can maintain in remembering God inside and outside these acts of worship. How I can infuse spirituality with the mundane. Not so much as how I can make the mundane spiritual for me, but how the mundane is also spiritual and sacred.

Before taking the intergroup dialogue class on faith, I was very confident about my faith identity or so I thought. I was also very confident that I had to embody it as much as I could to the way I thought it was supposed to be represented and practiced. My notion of identity was very one-dimensional. If I was Muslim, I had to be as Muslim as possible. But that came into conflict with my cultural heritage identity and nationality. Which one did I have to choose and embrace the most? I felt that I had to embody only one of them.

After the IGD, I realized I am an individual intrinsically distinct on the inside, but I embodied multiple identities on the outside and no one told me that was ok. I could still be myself and still be Muslim, Bengali, American, a woman to my own accord. The identity I thought I had the most confidence in – my faith identity – was the most complex of the lot.

The intergroup dialogue class has put a lot of things into perspective. One aspect I liked the most was getting to hear other people's stories and being able to relate to them to some degree. I thought it was a nice way to bring faith into the classroom. Growing up in a public school, faith and religion were topics confined to textbooks. Discussions about religion and personal stories were always left out unless it was about Christmas. This ties into the Christian privilege topic addressed in class. I wasn't aware of the concept of privilege until it was pinpointed, since I always thought and was taught it was the norm in the US. Then we discussed how each aspect of our own identities are privileged and oppressed.

Another component of the IGD model was connecting these aspects of identities to how society is structured around them. Many problems arise from identity politics, and religion was just an aspect of identity conflicts not the root (even though it is made out to be the root of all problems sometimes). The problems arise when identity is shrunken down merely to color, creed, or class. This course taught me about intersectionality in identity, how to dialogue to understand others, how to approach discourse about conflict, organize for social action, and think critically about how to attain and maintain a peaceful pluralistic society.

Although I learned much, I still struggled with creating critical dialogue. I got the listening part down, but putting various perspectives into the dialogue was difficult. Sometimes it's difficult to bring another perspective to the table when you want to see a certain situation from many points of view. In addition, having three other Muslims in the room all being male and one of them being a chaplain made it kind of intimidating. I felt like I was going to be judged, so I did not contribute as much. Dialogue is about agreeing to disagree, but I thought that this was sometimes missing from the discussions.

My most special memory from the class was the cultural chest activity. A cultural chest is where you take a box or container and decorate the outside representing things about you that people can see and on the inside you put things in there that represent you, but are not quite bluntly visible just by looking at you. I really enjoyed staying up late to make mine. I used an old cracker box that I covered in white paper and painted and drew on each side of it representing my visible identities. Inside the box however were aspects of my identity that could not be easily seen or distinguished. Like the fact that I had three books inside signified I liked to read books on poetry, spirituality, and holistic medicine. The most important thing inside my box was a piece of abstract art I drew, because it represents me accurately. I think this is what the inside of my brain looks like - not easily defined.

Tiffany Steinwert is an ordained Elder in the United Methodist Church who has spent her career working at the intersections of faith and social justice. In her many roles as pastor, scholar, and organizer, she has empowered people of all faiths and no faith to build relationships amidst difference, craft meaningful communities and create change through collective action. While serving as a pastor in New England congregations, she also worked as a teaching fellow at Boston University and Harvard Kennedy School teaching courses in theology, community organizing and leadership. Trained as a practical theologian, she is interested in how communities of faith respond to and interact with the pressing issues of the contemporary world. Steinwert holds a B.A. degree in Psychology and Women's Studies from Williams College in Williamstown, MA, a Master of Divinity degree from Boston University School of Theology in Boston, MA, and a Ph.D. in Practical Theology from Boston University. Among her civic interests, Steinwert serves the Syracuse community as a member of the Religious Roundtable of InterFaith Works of CNY and an advocate for Vera House.

Diane Swords has a Ph.D. in Social Science from Syracuse University's Maxwell School. Her research interrogates race, class, and gender in social movement strategy and democratic leadership. She is working on a book tentatively titled "We are the Second Superpower: Democracy in Nuclear Abolition Movements". As a part-time Instructor in Intergroup Dialogue, Sociology, Women's and Gender Studies, and Cultural Foundations of Education, she has co-facilitated Intergroup Dialogue courses on Race and Ethnicity, and on Gender. She helped to develop and pilot a new course entitled Dialogue in Action: Faith, Conflict and Community, which is running for the second time this spring of 2014. Diane also participates in dialogue and anti-oppression efforts outside the university, and chairs the board of Peace Action of Central New York, a local chapter of a national peace and social justice organization (peaceactioncny.org).

Nazia Islam is currently a student at Syracuse University majoring in Anthropology. She is interested in intercultural communication, comparative religion, and the study of human behavior and cognition; she supports community development and outreach paired with the arts to create change and awareness of social problems and issues.

References:

Canagarajah, A.S. (2010). "The possibility of a community of difference." *The Cresset: A Review of Literature, the Arts and Public Affairs*, Easter 2010, 28.

Jacobsen, D. and Jacobsen, R.H. (2012). *No Longer Invisible: Religion in University Education*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lopez, G. E. and Zúñiga, X. (2010). "Intergroup dialogue and democratic practice in higher education." *New Directions for Higher Education*, 2010: 35–42.

Patel, E. (2012). *Sacred Ground: Pluralism, Prejudice, and the Promise of America*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Patel, E. and Meyer, C. (2011). "The Civic Relevance of Interfaith Cooperation for Colleges and Universities." *Journal of College & Character*. Volume 12, No.1, February, 2011: 1-5.

Zúñiga, X., Nagda, B. A., Chesler, M., and Cytron-Walker, A. (Eds.). (2007). "Intergroup Dialogue in Higher Education: Meaningful Learning about Social Justice." ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report, no. 32(4). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.