

WHAT IS INTERGROUP DIALOGUE?

(Summarized from Intergroup Dialogue: Deliberative Democracy in School, College, Community, and Workplace)

Intergroup dialogue (IGD) 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.

IGD is a positive and powerful process for a just and diverse America, one in which different groups come together to discuss issues of community and conflict. 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. 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.

- 1. Dialogue is a process, not an event.** Dialogue takes place over time. 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).
- 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... is to engender deeper and broader understandings and insights, oftentimes leading to action, among all participants.
- 3. Dialogue requires an extended commitment.** Commitment to dialogue is needed for 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.
- 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.
- 5. Dialogue takes place best in an atmosphere of confidentiality, and issues of sponsorship and context are important to its success.** Because dialogue is about relationship building, it requires confidence that what people say in the dialogue will not be reported to nonparticipants... attempting dialogue in big crowds, or looking for sound bites and photo opportunities don't make for good dialogue... *listening* is essential. Dialogues are most often held because there are new or longstanding conflicts between groups arising from an imbalance of power and privilege between them. A dialogue may be sponsored by both or all parties, by a third-party convener acceptable to all participants, or by a single, "interested" party.
- 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 (Zuñiga and Chestler 1995; Gadlin 1994). There are also intragroup dialogues that bring together several subgroups within a larger identity group. 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.
- 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... Dialogue groups provide an opportunity for participants to engage issues of conflict in a safe, structured environment (Hubbard 1997).
- 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, Zuñiga, and Sevig 1995)...the importance of in-depth training to develop such skills cannot be underestimated (Adams, Bell, and Griffin 1997; Zuñiga et al. 1998). There is considerable value in having the social group of participants represented by co-

facilitators who can model constructive dialogic processes. Successful co-facilitation 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. Intergroup dialogue at its best integrates elements of content and process... Participants use outside reading and resources to reduce the possibility of misinformation being introduced and reinforced without question or challenge. Personal experience is also important to dialogue.
10. **Dialogue involves talking, but taking action often leads to good talking, and dialogue often leads to action.** Dialogues involve communication but many people find that having a concrete task or experience in common enriches dialogue. Some groups intentionally enter into dialogue to advance their work together while others decide at the conclusion of a dialogue to work together in a collaborative action project to effect social change. Other dialogues are organized so that there is talk only. In these cases there may be important new understandings and insights gained, but participants may never move beyond the intellectual and abstract to personal change and collective action based on the dialogue discussions.