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Reflections on Intergroup Dialogue
Facilitation

by

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A research paper submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for 3 credits
UNDERGRADUATE INDEPENDENT RESEARCH PROJECT Fall Term
1999, Professor Baker, Faculty Supervisor.

Faculty Comments

(Evaluative comment in which the faculty supervisor should briefly describe the nature of the research project and add an evaluating comment).

The importance of integrative dialog, feedback, and interaction has increased substantially, and so has the need for more active "learning by doing." This project and paper are excellent examples of reflection, the learning process, and facilitation experiences.



Signature of Faculty Supervisor



Title

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Only now that we have fully completed our coursework in intergroup dialogue facilitation training, can I really recognize the amount of learning I did this fall. It wasn't until I had completed two intergroup dialogues and an intragroup dialogue that I was able to recognize that learning had taken place. This course was one of those learning experiences in which I had to experience the class in its entirety before I could appreciate what had transpired.

Now that I have completed the facilitation of two intergroup dialogues, I can recognize how much learning I did. After the first dialogue, I met with my co-facilitator and reflected on my skills and areas for improvement. In class, we discussed problems that arose during our facilitation and some methods to deal with problems in the future. Between the first and second dialogues, I changed my views on the icebreaker, on trusting participants to bring up issues, on the importance of question wording, on introducing controversy, and encouraging participants to speak to one another. These changes made a huge difference in my ability to lead the dialogue, which showed in the second dialogue.

The icebreaker in our first dialogue was related to our topic of discussion, what being a woman meant for each participant. We asked participants to draw on posters what it meant to be a woman. We didn't allow participants to get more comfortable with one another before we asked them to discuss their opinions about womanhood. I learned from this experience that the icebreaker should be unrelated to the topic of discussion, and made this change for our second dialogue.

In the second intergroup dialogue, we had participants order their preferences of three events or foods, and the rest of the group had to guess that woman's preferences. Everyone seemed to enjoy the exercise, and relaxed a little more than in the first dialogue. After that icebreaker, we gave the participants a short quiz. We read off different statistics and asked them to guess if the statistic about women was true or false. This helped us bridge the icebreaker with discussion. I've learned to keep icebreakers casual, and unrelated to the topic discussion. I now realize the critical importance of a well-planned icebreaker.

During the first facilitation, I trusted the participants to bring up issues that my co-facilitator and I had planned. The dialogue was to be between white women and women of color, and we had planned to discuss racial differences, opening up the dialogue by explaining our drawings. We trusted that the participants (especially women of color) would include race in their artwork, but not one drawing included race. The absence of race, which we had planned to discuss for an hour, made for a difficult transition into dialogue. I learned to lead the participants explicitly.

In our second dialogue, we made sure to be clear about what we wanted to discuss and more so, we led participants to discuss the topics we had selected. The second dialogue was planned to discuss ideas about being feminist. There was limited diversity in the group; all of the participants considered themselves feminists. The statistics and stereotypes quiz set the stage for our discussion. After providing some facts, we asked the women to define feminism and label themselves as such, or not. They didn't pick this up and discuss for a few minutes as we had anticipated, so we began asking them direct

questions, and they began discussing what we had hoped. I learned by being very clear about what I'm looking for, I can move dialogue in any direction I need or choose.

Through these experiences, I learned how crucial the wording of questions is to dialogue. This wasn't an issue for me in the first dialogue, probably because we had prepared a very limited number of questions to ask at all. For our first dialogue, we assumed that the women would offer their opinions and beliefs readily. We didn't realize that we would have to squeeze dialogue out of them. I figured that they agreed to participate in the dialogue, so they should be willing to share information without any coaching. For the first twenty minutes that we were trying to dialogue in our second experience, we kept rephrasing our nicely written questions into those that could be answered with a yes or no. I'm not sure why we kept doing this, but all of our deep, open-ended questions got reworded into simple yes/no questions. We were still asking the same questions that we wanted to discuss by giving yes/no questions, and received yes/no answers. I couldn't figure out why the participants didn't have more to say about the questions at hand. This was very frustrating, but we were to blame.

When I became cognizant of the lack of dialogue, and the women's unwillingness to be flexible and give explanations behind their answers, I changed my style. I made sure that the questions I asked were open-ended. I included a few transitioning words that the women had shared in their discussion, but then I decided to trust what I had written on paper. Of course, as soon as I made the switch and began following my plan, the women began to own the questions and discussed them thoroughly. I learned very well, that if I ask yes/no questions, I cannot expect anything besides yes/no answers. For

the future I will keep this in mind and I believe I will be more successful encouraging dialogue.

Between dialogues, I learned a very important technique from my peers. We had discussed the importance of introducing controversial issues in class before our first attempt at dialogue, but I didn't pick this up until after our first experience. In the first dialogue, the women had little with which to challenge their beliefs. We basically asked them a whole bunch of opinion questions about interracial dating. There was little reason for our participants to challenge their beliefs. In the classroom afterwards, one of my peers recommended the inclusion controversial issues as a means to induce dialogue. I looked back on our co-facilitation experience leading dialogue in the classroom, and I realized that the best way to get dialogue participants to talk is to challenge their comfort zones. If we asked the participants to discuss things they've already thought about and have made clear opinions about, their discussion will be rather dry and quite short. If, we introduced topics that made our dialogue participants think about, or asked questions they hadn't previously discussed with friends, we would allow the women to test their possible opinions on the group. I realized that controversy was the way to go.

In the planning session for our second dialogue, we decided to discuss the notion that all feminists are lesbians. We anticipated that some of the women would be uncomfortable with this idea, because all of the participants are heterosexual, and being a lesbian is not socially acceptable. We asked the women to discuss some of the vulnerabilities women open themselves to by labeling themselves feminist. They skirted around the idea of lesbianism for a few minutes, but with some encouragement and

prodding, we led one woman to bring up her discomfort with being viewed as lesbian. For me, this was a huge feat. We led these open-minded women to discuss an issue with a double-edged sword: they believed lesbianism was acceptable in theory, but have real issues with the idea that others might mistake them for lesbians if they labeled themselves feminist. This challenged their comfort zones, and I believe that for that moment, we had true dialogue. The dialogue may have lasted only one minute, but the women were challenged, they were relieved to feel that others felt the same way, and they wanted to feel more secure with their feelings, so they talked with one another. We let the silence linger a little longer than we had, allowing women to build up the courage to discuss their true feelings about being considered lesbians by others. With allowed silence, the women began to share ideas that weren't necessarily politically correct. They were ashamed to have some of the feelings they did, and challenged their comfort zones by admitting to less-than-socially-just thoughts. It was bliss! I will never plan a dialogue that doesn't include questions that don't make my co-facilitator or me a touch uneasy. As soon as icebreakers are over and we are warmed up, I will slip the controversy into the dialogue and get my participants on the edge of their seats.

In our first dialogue, I found it tough to get the women talking to one another. My co-facilitator or myself would pose a question to the group and the participants would respond to one of us. I made a big mistake of using eye contact to make each participant feel she had to discuss every question. My first co-facilitating experience ended up in rounds. I would ask a question and we'd go around the room giving opinions. Occasionally, someone would interrupt the circle by challenging another woman's

comments, but we would pick up the round when the interruption was through. I was unable to get the women talking to one another. I was aware of my nonverbal communication problem upon reflecting that first experience. My co-facilitator and I discussed ways to avoid repeating the rounds in the second dialogue.

In the second dialogue, I didn't nod to affirm what the women were saying. I kept a rather blank look on my face and stared at my notepad. While the women could tell that I was listening, they didn't have my reassuring nod to let them know that I understood what they had to say. It was very difficult for me to avoid the nod. After I posed a question to the group, I tried to become invisible. Again, I stared at my paper, so that even though I was the one asking the question, the participants felt uncomfortable responding to me, because I wasn't there to reassure them. They had to look at one another when responding to my questions, and that made it more likely for others to respond. Again, it was really tough for me to try to become invisible, and stay out of the dialogue, even as a support. However, I learned that I have a great deal of control over the dialogue, and that there are techniques I can employ to encourage behaviors I'd like to see.

All of these minor changes I made between the first and second dialogue improved my situation. It didn't take much to recognize the problems I encountered in the first experience, and with a little reflection, I already had solutions to my problems. All of the scenarios I've described above are minor tweaks made to my first dialogue, helped me to more efficiently get to my goal - intergroup dialogue. This learning process

will continue, and each time I facilitate, I will be able to identify things I can do to deal with process issues that arise in dialogue.

I feel as though much of the identification of things I could change came from within. I believe I was looking for more feedback from Roger and Ellen. While I didn't ask how I was doing, the trainers did not offer much constructive criticism to assist my learning process. I did receive those suggestions from my classmates. But, because my classmates have little more experience than I do, I was not fully willing to accept their feedback and suggestions. I'm the kind of person who learns best by knowing what I could have done differently to improve my situation. I like to get that feedback from people with authority, my instructors. I had a tough time right up to the end of this class, because I never got feedback from my instructors.

I didn't capitalize on the opportunity to receive more feedback from my co-facilitator. For a long while, I had issues of not wanting to offend my co-facilitator by being completely straightforward. I wanted us to get along by co-existing, rather than getting through the conflict so we could work best together. When we reflected on our first dialogue for a few hours, we never stopped agreeing and offer each other some constructive criticism. I could have asked my co-facilitator for more feedback than I did, and I regret not asking. I am a very honest person, and I really try to offer good suggestions to help others learn. I was afraid that I would offer my co-facilitator a number of ways to improve, and she would have not have been willing to share with me open feedback. In the future, I will make sure to establish open lines of communication, and ask my co-facilitator to offer up some suggestions for improvement.

At this point, I am completely prepared to challenge my comfort zones and take risks. I feel the risks that I am willing to take are more like leaps than small steps towards improvement, which is a little disconcerting. I want to learn from the facilitation process so much, that I am ready to stick my neck out and risk being burned a few times to better my facilitation skills. I have dreamed of how wonderful a learning experience facilitation would be for me and I feel as though I've only gotten a small taste of that education. I am thirsty for more learning, about myself and about others. I am ready to facilitate. While I recognize now the amount of planning that will have to go into facilitation, I am ready for the challenge. I still need to do a good deal of learning, but I am anxious to begin my long awaited journey.

I have done a tremendous amount of learning and I am anxiously waiting to continue learning by doing. I still need to work on my oral communication skills, but I am planning to take a speech class concurrently while I facilitate. I still need to work on my facilitation skills, but I am planning to work on those concurrently while I facilitate. I hope I am afforded the opportunity to continue the learning process that I have enjoyed so much this semester.