

Can Intergroup Dialogue Combined with SLCE Answer Today's Call to Action?

Khuram Hussain and Jeremy Wattles

Hobart and William Smith College

Dozens of bodies lay stiff and still. Arms and legs overlay one another. Black, Brown, and White undergraduate bodies clogged the arteries of the student center at Hobart and William Smith (HWS) Colleges in Geneva, New York. Flanking them were faculty and staff, standing in solidarity, holding block letter signs reading: “BLACK LIVES MATTER,” “HANDS UP DON’T SHOOT,” and “I CAN’T BREATHE.” It was the end of the Fall 2014 semester, and Black Lives Matter protests pervaded cities and campuses nationwide. This was not the first time our city had witnessed mass protest against police violence. Following the 2011 police shooting death of unarmed Black resident Cory Jackson, Geneva’s Hispanic and Black community and White allies rose up in protest to demand accountability by, and greater inclusion in, city government.

Such campus and community protests have guided us to reimagine service-learning as cooperative, rights-based, and dialogue-driven. At the center of our vision for the future of the service-learning and community engagement (SLCE) movement is an inextricable link between dialogue and collaborative action. In our campus-community initiative *Tools for Social Change*, we use intergroup dialogue (IGD) to help students, faculty, staff, and city residents co-create knowledge and expand their civic capacity. Beyond the particularities of our work, we see a universal role for dialogue in building trust and understanding between stakeholders so they can more effectively serve their communities.

In his 2015 framing piece for the SLCE Future Directions Project, Zlotkowski calls for “enhanced social efficacy” through stakeholder inclusiveness and demonstrable community impact. This thought piece dreams out loud, with Zlotkowski and others’ bold calls to develop SLCE programs for collaborative learning and social change. For us, collaborative learning requires creating conditions for stakeholders to engage in active, often difficult, conversations about identity, power, and oppression. It is not until we have named our personal experience with (or complicity in) broad and

deep forces of inequality that we can begin to create community anew.

What follows is an overview of our call for linking dialogue-to-action in SLCE. Throughout the piece we reference our initiative, *Tools for Social Change*, not as a program description but as a love story about enactments of justice and human agency that moved us to share our vision for democratic, transformative SLCE. We offer nothing prescriptive, but instead send a dispatch from the place where memory and imagination meet. Yet this is not a passive call. Any ethical pedagogy must attend to the historical moment it occupies. SLCE practitioners and scholars cannot turn away from the fierce urgency of the call to empower our communities.

In their 2016 thought piece, Whitney and colleagues call for designing asset-based, collaborative programs that engage with the contexts of local places and national realities. Looking at today’s national realities we see a rising tide of youth movements for racial and economic justice. Our campus mirrors national activism. As we write this piece, students are rallying to establish HWS Colleges as a sanctuary campus, participating in the International Women’s Day Strike, marching against the Muslim Ban, and participating in national marches. Our students are calling us to the realities of the world. In today’s climate of social activism, we believe SLCE, combined with IGD, is uniquely situated to address these realities.

We both affirm our students’ street-level activism and assert that SLCE educators have a special role to play in supporting democratic urges. Student activism often engages in discrete acts of virtue signaling (e.g., a single rally or vigil), rather than building, power at a grassroots level to achieve systemic change. This is where IGD holds a capacity for generating student and community civic collaborations: by supporting collaborative learning. Within the context of democratically designed SLCE this can evolve into collective action.

Lessons from our SLCE Model: Tools for Social Change

We witness firsthand the unique role IGD can play in SLCE through *Tools for Social Change*. We structure this approach to SLCE as a scaffolded process in which students, faculty, staff, and community partners engage in critical dialogues about social class- and race-based inequality and ultimately develop and execute projects co-designed, sustainable, and focused on local issues. *Tools* explicitly shares the view that SLCE should enhance stakeholder inclusiveness and demonstrate community impact. The curriculum has four phases:

1. Participants form group relationships by sharing their experience with identity, difference, and community.
2. Participants explore the lived realities of white privilege and racist oppression through structured activities and dialogue.
3. Participants identify dimensions of exclusion and division within our community (e.g., areas of disinvestment or pollution, employment, and housing discrimination) and the ways in which some participants are complicit beneficiaries while others are subordinated by these divisions.
4. Lastly, participants identify ideas for community solutions, including alliance building and advocacy work.

Tools is now going into its third year and has been reshaped by every incoming cohort of students and community members.

Beyond the programmatic particularities of *Tools*, the approach has three underlying principles relevant to the SLCE movement at large. First, dialogue is essential to building interpersonal trust and understanding. Second, well-organized dialogue can move participants into well-designed civic actions that speak to the living realities of a community. Finally, *both* dialogue *and* civic action must be present. The absence of one undermines the other. Sustaining both empowers both.

Dialogue has a powerful capacity to promote interpersonal connection and understanding between people from different backgrounds. In our work, we employ an IGD model developed at the University of Michigan in the 1980s by educators focused on intergroup race dialogues (Zúñiga, Nagda, Chesler, & Cytron-Walker 2007). We are interested in IGD's ability to create a supportive space for participants to share their experiences with identity, difference, and community. And we want participants to explore their lived realities of privilege and oppression

in ways that are rooted in their lived experiences and relevant to local realities. IGD offers an especially important method of grounding our shared understanding of inequality within our community and within ourselves. In our previous experiences leading SLCE projects, we witnessed that illusory notion that students often have of inequality "out there," which they are supposed to "help" with. By focusing on the full range of participants' perspectives and lived realities with inequality through the IGD process, we are all positioned to look inward at our own status within an unequal community.

This kind of dialogue creates space for participants to eventually speak openly about their experiences with racism and the campus community's unchecked entitlements within the city. For instance, during one dialogue-session, a community member expressed frustration with how faculty were given preferential treatment by city government officials as well as local media outlets. In his words, "you at Hobart and William Smith have all the power in this town." IGD provided language to interrogate some of the faculty and staff's social entitlements. Ultimately, IGD is about collective interrogation of inequality. By using a process that allows for shared meaning making *and* that acknowledges the ways privilege limits opportunities for equal exchange, we aspire to lay the groundwork for more equitable collaboration.

Furthermore, we assert that IGD is uniquely valuable in the context of SLCE. On-campus IGD experiences do not effectively lend themselves to collective action (see, for example, Yu & Taylor, 1999). IGD is usually designed for classroom use and abstracts inequality beyond the classroom. By contrast, linking IGD with SLCE offers a clearer path toward social change, since SLCE calls for experiential learning outside of the classroom, and, at its best, demands engagement that produces positive community outcomes. For instance, Hartman (2015) calls for SLCE that is "community-driven" and "explicitly advances the goals of economic equity, equal partnership, mutual learning, cooperative and positive social change . . ." (p. 98). Participating in this kind of SLCE requires that we orient our curricular aims to directly impact issues of equity and justice in our communities. In this context IGD lends itself to shared community work to address the very issues that required IGD in the first place! In our case, for example, we dialogue about the mounting distress in our community over the dispossession of people of color in Geneva, New York, on and off campus, and then develop and implement initiatives to address it.

Ultimately, situating our dialogues within a place-based SLCE program allows us to intervene

into a set of issues that are not typically addressed in on-campus intergroup race dialogue. Specifically, we introduce questions related to the rights of all Genevans to participate in the city's public spaces. We explore privilege and oppression as it relates to how Geneva is occupied and who is 'occupied' upon. Through storytelling and dialogue, participants share their experiences with institutional racism as it is lived in the city, including on campus. In turn, our vision of justice becomes rooted in the living city and our sense of service rooted in the lives of people we encounter. When we begin from community knowledge of local issues, then our community solutions can emerge organically.

Emergent Community Solutions: An Example

The following illustration of one of our civic initiatives provides a sample trajectory for moving from deep dialogue on to deep civic work. While the anecdote is specific to a moment in *Tools*, its aim here is to provide a glimpse into our wider aspiration for an approach to SLCE that emerges out of authentic, collaborative encounters and speaks truth to power.

Early in 2016, concerned members of a local volunteer committee were commissioned to develop a Comprehensive Plan for the city's land use policies. The plan would advise city government on how to develop public spaces and set funding priorities for the next 15 years. The Comprehensive Plan volunteers collaborated with *Tools* because of our work to promote inclusive processes in the city. We held a series of dialogues about the Comprehensive Plan and asked our participants to share their thoughts and feelings about it. We concluded that the plan overrepresented the views of upper-middle class residents because it relied heavily upon data from an online survey to which few working class, non-White residents replied. *Tools* addressed concerns regarding the data collection process by presenting to the city a vision for a "Big Talk." We proposed using *Tools*' capability for facilitating dialogue for gatherings in spaces occupied by residents whom the online survey failed to engage: Black and Hispanic churches, barbershops, housing projects, free lunch program sites, the Salvation Army, and senior housing.

We mobilized locally trained facilitators, including our students, who engaged in 14 community dialogues in 12 different locations, recording a combined total of over 22 hours of dialogue throughout the city. More than half of the participants were Hispanic or Black, and most were women. Three of the dialogues engaged Geneva's Spanish-speaking residents, with one conducted entirely in Spanish

and others conducted bilingually with the help of translators. We wanted to understand what public spaces empower residents and what public spaces marginalize them.

A faculty colleague analyzed the transcribed interviews and presented a summary document to the public. The aim of the Big Talk was to produce this document and better inform the write-up of the comprehensive plan. However, it retains an additional and equally valuable purpose: It represents the production of knowledge at the grassroots through collaborative processes. Genevans told their own stories, through themselves and to themselves, and echoed them back to those in power. It was a moment of dreaming out loud about what democratic urban development can be.

These narratives, which are now public record (cityofgenevany.com), brought to the surface stories of systematic racism, job and housing discrimination, and racial isolation. Further, participants provided a critical reading of the city's development policies as essentially a process of dispossession masked by a selectively representative image of an idyllic lakeside town. In plainspoken ways, interviewees also provided creative ideas for supporting economic empowerment by licensing food trucks, expanding public library programming, and redesigning public transportation to improve food access.

Here is why the Big Talk – serving here as an example of IGD – matters beyond our little city. First, the dialogical process that created the initiative was symbolically and literally embodied in the process. In other words, by beginning with collaborative dialogue, we provided space for participants to become accustomed to collaboratively developing processes to address particular instances of inequity and exclusion. In turn, those processes were collectively executed through community-directed initiatives like the Big Talk; while the report was part of the city government's comprehensive plan, and had logistical support from city staff, *Tools* volunteers facilitated the conversation spaces and thus the knowledge creation which the document represents. Second, this process of engaging members of the community within a diverse subset of a city was one of approaching social problems as fundamentally about building community. For instance, instead of police accountability being seen as an abstract issue of "social justice," it could be understood as a matter of access to comparable public services for all members of a community. Fair housing could be seen as part of what is required of neighbors in a community. In other words, justice becomes a community-building project – or as Cornel West told an audience of Genevans in 2009

– “justice is what love looks like in public.” Lastly, we believe SLCE must retain (from start to finish) a persistent commitment to deep interpersonal understanding between stakeholders. Nothing else we do matters if that principle is ignored. How can we truly participate in the lives of others without acknowledging their lives and having our lives acknowledged too?

Hope in Collaborative Process

We aspire for practices in SLCE wherein the journey is as empowering as the destination. For us, that requires a focus on dialogues that prioritize democratic co-production of knowledge at the grassroots level. While not all practitioners will utilize IGD (or any formal dialogue) in their SLCE activities, we call upon democratic-minded educators to consider the ways in which we literally and symbolically dialogue within our communities. For instance, how do our off-campus partnership sites disrupt or reinforce the power dynamics of the campus “bubble” that students often experience? *Tools’* weekly dialogues are situated in the city’s oldest Black church, within the city’s lead-poisoned 6th Ward. Historically it is a location our students have engaged with as a charity site, where food is donated or fresh paint is provided. We located *Tools* here as a quiet reclamation of where important cultural and political work is recognizably done in the city.

Ultimately, this dialogue-driven approach was our way to address broader considerations related to developing justice-minded, collaborative SLCE projects: How are marginalized members of the community accessing SLCE spaces with authority and autonomy? Are there literal or figurative “circles” where students and community members collaborate? Is leadership easily distinguished or is it diffuse and situation specific? Is democratic decision-making in place? Lastly, have we designed and promoted specific incentives or opportunities to recruit, include, and empower historically silenced participants?

In the current political moment, with the advance of new waves of campus protests, we remain hopeful about the future of dialogically-driven, community-directed, democratic SLCE. Ursula K.

Le Guin (1974) reminds us that “You cannot buy the revolution. You cannot make the revolution. You can only be the revolution. It is in your spirit, or it is nowhere” (p. 241-242). In that spirit, we do not present our work as fixed or proprietary but as, itself, part of a dialogue about how we might dream differently about the future of SLCE. We maintain that SLCE is uniquely situated to reimagine how institutions of higher education choose to occupy spaces and (potentially) confront structural inequality. Our hope here is to enter into conversation with other justice-minded educators who see the transformational possibilities of community-driven SLCE. At our best, we can collectively be part of a wider movement to push the edges of our standard practices and advance the rights and dignity of all people in all of our communities.

References

- Hartman, E. (2015). A strategy for community-driven service-learning and community engagement: Fair trade learning. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 22(1), 97-100.
- Le Guin, Ursula K. (1974). *The dispossessed: An ambiguous utopia*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Tools for Social Change. (2015). “Big Talk in the Little City” (unpublished documents), Retrieved from <http://cityofgenevany.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Part-3-Final.pdf>
- Whitney, B., Muse, S., Harrison, B., Edwards, K., & Clayton, P. H. (2016). Learning from and with community organizations to navigate the tensions of democratic engagement. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 23(1), 85-90.
- Yu, C. M., Taylor, W. L. (Eds.). (1999). *The test of our progress: The Clinton record on civil rights*. New York: Citizens’ Commission on Civil Rights.
- Zlotkowski, E. (2015). Twenty years and counting: A framing essay. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 22(1), 82-85.
- Zúñiga, X. Nagda, B. A., Chesler, M., & Cytron-Walker, A. (2007). *Intergroup dialogues in higher education: Meaningful learning about social justice*. ASHE Higher Education Report Series, 32(4). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Authors

KHURAM HUSSAIN (hussain@hws.edu) is an associate professor of education at Hobart and William Smith Colleges and is a co-founder of *Tools for Social Change* in Geneva, NY. Khuram completed his Ph.D. in the Cultural Foundations of Education at Syracuse University. His current scholarship and teaching explore grassroots anti-racist education and the possibilities of democratic learning. His book, *Weapons for Minds: Visual Thought in Muhammad Speaks* is under contract with Johns Hopkins University Press.

JEREMY WATTLES (wattles@hws.edu) graduated from the University of Edinburgh in 2006 with an MSc in English Literature. In 2008 he returned to Upstate New York, where he grew up, and spent two years in national service as an AmeriCorps VISTA worker, organizing volunteer programs and nonprofit internships for students. Currently, he works at Hobart and William Smith Colleges as the associate director of the Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning, where he is responsible for several tutoring programs, volunteer projects, and social justice initiatives. He is a co-founder of *Tools for Social Change* in Geneva, NY.