Engaging Impasse: Nurturing a Culture of Dialogic Engagement on a University Campus

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Abstract: Universities have historically fostered spaces where students, faculty, staff, and administration can fruitfully engage in discussion around contentious issues. Current political divisions have had a chilling effect on these discussions inside and outside the classroom. To nurture a campus culture of dialogic engagement, the communication studies department in collaboration with the DEI office began a campus dialogue project that invited faculty, staff, students, and administration to participate in monthly dialogues focused on cultural impasse topics. This 5-year project has demonstrated that university communication studies departments can be instrumental in helping community members cross organizational boundaries to engage in challenging dialogues when they are focused on engagement, facilitated by students, intentionally welcoming, and predictably organized.

Introduction

Not for the first time in US history, freedom of speech is under attack on university campuses (Cole, 2024). Public and private universities around the country are launching initiatives designed to reinvigorate free speech and civil discourse. According to Cole (2024), “The academic enterprise demands a commitment to open debate and free inquiry” (p. 6). In his article, Cole referred to an incident that took place on the Yale campus in 1974 where students shouted down physicist William Shockley. According to Lewis (1975), Shockley, known for his view that Black people are genetically inferior, was invited to speak at Yale. During his remarks, students shouted so loudly, Shockley was unable to be heard. In response to
the incident, Yale convened a committee comprised of students, faculty, administrators, and alumni to reexamine its position on free speech (Lewis, 1975). The outcome of the committee's work was a recommitment to free speech. The committee wrote: “The history of intellectual growth and discovery clearly demonstrates the need for unfettered freedom, the right to think the unthinkable, discuss the unmentionable, and challenge the unchallengeable” (Cole, 2024, p. 6).

In recent months, protests on university campuses are once again testing the limits of free speech. Local and national politicians are using the unrest to further a legislative crackdown on university faculty and academic freedom. In the wake of the recent resignations of Harvard President Claudine Gay and University of Pennsylvania President Liz Magill over their responses to anti-Semitism on their campuses, House Republicans are ramping up investigations into top U.S. universities (Karni, 2024). Karni writes, “the investigation is disturbing to many academics who fear that Republicans are merely trying to legitimize a broader attack on higher education by rooting it in a concern about antisemitism” (par. 12). Irene Mulvey, president of the American Association of University Professors, responded on social media, “I know weaponized Congressional hearings and the politicization of academic standards to advance a partisan political agenda when I see it” (Karni, 2024, par. 13).

In 2023, Dr. Neil Buchanan resigned his position at the University of Florida only 4 years after he was hired. He described the climate at UF as, “hostile to professors and to higher education more generally” (Saul, 2023, par. 2). Buchanan is part of an uptick in faculty departures from Florida’s public university system. The school of arts has been particularly hard hit as they, “struggle to hire and retain good faculty and graduate students in the current political climate” (Saul, 2023, par. 9). Dr. Buchanan indicated that the University of Florida’s decision to establish a post-tenure review process would limit academic freedom. Buchanan remarked, “It’s not just that the laws are so vague and obviously designed to chill speech that DeSantis doesn’t like. It’s that they simultaneously took away the benefit of tenured faculty to stand up for what’s right” (Saul, 2023, par. 37).

The politically motivated measures to restrict discursive freedom in Florida’s public education system have inspired legislatures and universities around the country to take aim at discursive freedom on university campuses (Mazzei, 2023; Nierenberg, 2022). Many universities are responding to student protests by creating policies they describe as “protecting free speech and student safety,” but in fact “limit speech on campuses” (Hicks, 2024, p. 3). University of California at Davis law professor Brian Soucek suggests, “colleges often attempt to keep the peace rather than foster important conversations” (Hicks, 2024, p. 3). Soucek continues:

It's common that when faced with controversies, universities and other institutions will default to order over expression. It's just easier. It's less costly for them. It really takes some commitment to decide no, we're going to stand for our First Amendment principles even when they mean that campus will be a little more unruly and disruptive than we're used to. (Hicks, 2024, p. 3)

Framing legislation as expanding intellectual diversity, the Republican-led Indiana Senate passed a law that will require public college faculty to be evaluated on how and whether they espouse “intellectual diversity” (Zahneis, 2024). The law allows college boards to deny tenure or promotion to faculty they consider “unlikely to foster a culture of free inquiry, free expression, and intellectual diversity within the institution” (p. 1). The board could also deny tenure or promotion if they determine that a faculty
Challenging the notion that faculty should stay in their disciplinary lane, Ruiz-Mesa and Hunter (2019) contend that communication courses should encourage challenging dialogues around impasse topics like immigration, race, social class, and sexuality to help university students develop skills for engaging across difference. “Communication courses provide a unique, yet potentially challenging opportunity to use curricular goals as a backdrop for healthy and inclusive discussions of these complex topics” (p. 134).

Inviting the entire campus community to come together in dialogue may help participants complicate the narratives they attribute to those who hold opposing views. “Pressed by the Supreme Court decisions diminishing rights that liberals hold dear and expanding those cherished by conservatives, the United States appears to be drifting apart into separate nations, with diametrically opposed social, environmental and health policies” (Weisman, 2022, p. 1). Restricting freedom of speech in schools limits our ability to bridge the sociopolitical divide. This essay describes the way one communication studies department at a small liberal arts university in the Midwest has been using a campus-wide dialogue project to nurture open communication between students, faculty, and staff.

In her 2018 essay, Anna Wiederhold Wolfe argued that the reification of us versus them binaries and the rigidification of narrow conceptions of in-groups and out-groups cultivates conditions in which authoritarianism can flourish. Through the construction of an enemy other who threatens the security and prosperity of the idealized collective, authoritarian regimes gain support for their promises to reinstate order, control, and clear boundaries.” (p. 10)

Wiederhold Wolfe suggests dialogue and deliberation can “foster the disruption and reorganization of rigid group boundaries” (p. 10).

These calcifying group boundaries motivated Arlie Hochschild (2018) to move to a small town in Louisiana to try to understand the fractures exposed during the 2016 Presidential election. She described an “empathy wall” that is preventing those with different beliefs and social circumstances from empathizing with one another. Paulo Freire argued, poverty, racism, sexism, heterosexism, and other forms of discrimination are not natural traits of our humanity. Instead, these conditions exist as naturalized aberrations invented within history by human beings. And because this is so, oppression in all its faces can be reinvented out of existence.” (Miller, 2005, p. 31)

**The Dialogue Project**

In the spring of 2019, a communication studies department at a small, private, Midwestern university began a collaboration with the campus DEI office to encourage inclusive and candid conversation across university boundaries. The goal of the dialogue project was to nurture a culture of discursive engagement around critical issues so we could move from a reactive to a proactive model of crisis communication. The dialogue project was motivated by three key concerns. First, like many universities, we were in the
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habit of fracturing ourselves into resentful enclaves when critical issues were raised on campus. Although we were not facing any critical issues on our campus when we developed the dialogue project, we were aware of issues on other campuses in the Midwest. We did not consider our campus to be immune to the challenges faced by our regional colleagues. By hosting regular dialogues focused on impasse issues, we hoped to nurture a habit of coming together rather than fracturing during crisis. We also hoped to encourage community members to consider a dialogic approach when addressing contentious issues in their departments. Second, the University developed a process to respond to bias incidents and hate crimes on campus. When students, faculty, and/or staff reported an incident, members of the Bias Response Team (BRT) reached out to the accuser and the accused, but the broader community was not a part of the learning. This was problematic because there were often witnesses to the incidents, but confidentiality dictated that the process be private. The effect was to cultivate an atmosphere of suspicion and anger. We planned to use the dialogues to explore issues around bias and marginalization. Finally, the author of this essay was involved in a Public Dialogue & Deliberation roundtable discussion during the 2018 Salt Lake City NCA Convention where participants lamented the tendency of their universities to reach out to them for dialogue facilitation only when there was a crisis on campus. Stephen Hartnett, former president of the National Communication Association (NCA), challenged NCA members in 2017 to consider how they could use their understanding of communication to better serve their communities (NCA, 2017). The communication studies faculty embraced that charge by collaborating with university colleagues to nurture a culture of dialogic engagement between students, faculty, staff, and administration so we might be in relationship before we are faced with a future, yet unknown, campus crisis.

**Nurture a Culture of Engagement**

Collaborating with the DEI office helped the communication studies faculty better understand the issues facing our campus community, strengthened ties with our DEI colleagues, and offered our department a way to use our communication training to serve our campus community (NCA, 2017). We were ready to launch the Dialogue Project (DP) in the spring of 2020, but the pandemic put our plans on hold. We finally hosted our first dialogue in February of 2021 on the topic of racism in the United States. By establishing a habit of dialogic engagement around controversial issues we hoped to encourage faculty, staff, and students to reflexively turn to dialogue to address any campus conflict or campus crises. Nagda et al. (2009) conducted a study examining the impact of dialogue on university students’ ingroup collaboration. They discovered that “It is not simply enough to bring students and the community members from diverse backgrounds together. These communicative interactions must be structured and facilitated in productive ways” (p. 54). We knew we would need to design a dialogue process that would invite participation across organizational boundaries (students, faculty, staff, and administration). We were further aware that the process would need to be well structured, so the participants understood the value of the dialogues and would commit to continued participation.

Public policy scholar Oliver Escobar (2011) stressed that “the purpose of dialogue is learning, exploring, and building relationships” (p. 27). Once relationships have been established, community members may be better able to engage one another honestly around challenging issues. Paulo Freire (1970) understood authentic relationships as foundational to effective dialogue, “Founding itself upon love, humility, and faith, dialogue becomes a horizontal relationship in which mutual trust between dialoguers is the logical consequence” (p. 80).
Escobar (2011) stressed that individuals will opt out of participation in public forums to avoid confrontation with those who espouse opposing views. He went on to differentiate between conflict and confrontation, asserting that confrontation often inhibits a healthy exploration of ideas, “Confrontational communication . . . hinders mutual learning, fosters shallow exchanges, accentuates polarization, and leaves the issues underexplored” (p. 14). Conflict, on the other hand, is seen as a “point of departure” requiring “further exploration through collaborative investigation” (p. 14). According to Escobar, these collaborative investigations can emerge through dialogue, so the community is ready for deliberation. This dialogue project was designed to encourage participants to embrace conflict as an important part of building understanding.

We facilitated dialogues on Zoom from the spring of 2021 through the spring of 2022 to protect participants during the pandemic. These early dialogues were well received by staff and faculty (typically attracting 23–27 participants), but student participation was low until we moved to in-person dialogues. We suspect the students participated less in the virtual dialogues due to pandemic-related Zoom-fatigue. We hosted our first in-person dialogue in the fall of 2022. The topic was abortion/body autonomy which attracted 30 participants, evenly split between students, faculty, and staff. Ordinarily we would have introduced the topic with a 6-minute video we sourced on YouTube, but we were not confident we would be able to identify a video that would effectively welcome all participants into the dialogue. For this dialogue we agreed that it would be better to have a member of our history faculty situate abortion access in a historical context. The information helped participants feel competent on the topic without establishing a position on the issue. After the short lecture, participants moved into small dialogue circles with a student or faculty facilitator and addressed two questions: Who or what has shaped your opinion about abortion? What is your reaction to the politicizing of the issue of abortion? After a 20-minute small group dialogue, the student facilitator brought the entire group together with the following questions: What did you discuss in your small group that you are still thinking about? Did your breakout group discuss any questions you would like the entire group to consider? What have we not discussed that you think is important? The abortion dialogue inspired strong emotions, particularly in faculty and staff. The dialogue nurtured a space where we were able to “relax ridged group boundaries” (Wiederhold Wolfe, 2018, p. 10). The student facilitator nurtured a space that allowed participants to share their grief on the subject without dominating the discourse.

We are still working to encourage participants to embrace conflicting ideas when emotions run high (Escobar, 2011). In response to some participants’ feedback, we have added to the community agreements a specific instruction to embrace conflict (Appendix A).

We have been building attendance since that first in-person dialogue with a peak of 75 participants for the dialogue on Critical Race Theory in February of 2023. Recent dialogues have averaged 25–30 participants. We have never had fewer than 25 participants.

**Inviting Participation**

**The Role of Student Facilitators**

We made a couple decisions early in the planning that have served us well. The most impactful was the decision to have every dialogue facilitated by trained student facilitators. The student facilitators
are trained in a course we designed called Communicating Through Dialogue. The course balances a philosophical and practical approach to dialogue. The primary texts used in the course are Bojer et al.'s (2008) *Mapping Dialogue: Essential Tools for Social Change* and Oliver Escobar's (2011) *Public Dialogue and Deliberation: A Communication Perspective for Public Engagement Practitioners*. Students learn how to facilitate and participate in a variety of dialogue models. The dialogue course instructor sends an email to all faculty notifying them that student dialogue teams are available to facilitate 45–50-minute dialogues in their courses in the fall. Faculty respond to the email if they are interested in hosting a facilitating team. Most faculty ask student teams to facilitate dialogues on course content. In the case of first-year seminar faculty, facilitating teams are often asked to lead dialogues focused on how new students are adapting to college life. Before they facilitate dialogues in the campus community, each student will have participated in and facilitated several dialogues in the classroom. Once the students have experienced at least six facilitation models, they begin facilitating dialogues in other classes on campus or at the all-campus DP events. We discovered that faculty and staff make themselves more vulnerable when a student facilitates. We avoid the kind of grandstanding typical of faculty meetings because the student facilitators hold a gentle space for participants to share honestly and listen with curiosity. The student facilitators have been a valuable part of the project’s success, and the experience has also been valuable for the facilitators. Several student volunteers have emailed to thank the organizers for the opportunity. One student facilitator remarked, “This has been such an incredible experience so far, and I am so grateful to be part of it. Thank you so much!” A second student facilitator wrote, “Thank you so much for this opportunity and for helping guide us through these dialogues!” Following several of the dialogues, faculty and administrators have approached the organizers to remark on the positive impact of the student facilitators on the dialogue experience.

**The Invitation to Join the Conversation**

Second, we send an email reminder to the entire campus community 1 week before the regularly scheduled dialogue (Appendix B). The invitation reminds participants to enter the dialogues ready to listen with curiosity and share generously. We assure them that we work to nurture a space where everyone feels heard and respected. Since this project is intended to build relationships across organizational boundaries, we structure the dialogues to nurture Freire's (1970) notion of “horizontal relationship” (p. 80). We remind every participant that they have something valuable to share. One of the community agreements read at the beginning of each dialogue specifically states, “Whether you are student, faculty, staff, or administration, you bring a piece of the puzzle. Share from your experience and listen with curiosity.” Many of the faculty have already been nurturing this style of engagement in their courses since, at the communication studies department's urging, we have a discourse instructive component in our general education curriculum. Faculty buy-in increased after the communication studies faculty presented workshops to prepare faculty from every discipline to teach discourse instruction in their courses.

The Office of Diversity and Inclusion publicizes the dialogue in their weekly email and on Instagram. Posts are typically created by a work study student increasing the appeal to a traditional undergraduate audience. Finally, we intentionally welcome participants when they arrive and avoid surveillance. We do not require participants to RSVP, and we do not take attendance. The dialogues should be a free space where everyone is welcome, but no one is required to attend.
Predictably Organizing the Dialogues

The process we developed begins with the DP team planning the agenda for the dialogue (see Appendix C). The planning team is comprised of three communication studies faculty, two DEI staff members, and two student facilitators. We use the same format for each dialogue to help regular participants relax into the routine. One week before the scheduled dialogue, the facilitating team (student and faculty facilitators) meet to discuss the upcoming dialogue. Topics for the dialogues have been developed in two ways. First, each semester the DEI and communication faculty members of the DP team reach out to students in their area to solicit topic suggestions. Second, the DP team narrows the list of suggested topics and identifies the three that will be used for the semester. Finally, the full faculty are notified about the topics and schedule, so they can include it in their syllabi. During the 5 years since we launched the DP, we have revisited four topics because we believed there was still energy in the community for engagement. At the end of each dialogue, we remind participants that this is just the beginning of conversations on the topic. We invite each participant to continue the conversation in their residence halls, offices, and classrooms. The goal of our project is to nurture a habit of engagement rather than identify solutions for the issues. We are working toward Wiederhold Wolfe’s (2018) notion of fostering “disruption and reorganization of rigid group boundaries” (p. 10). In recent months the community has expressed interest in expanding the project to include longer dialogues in the evening to explore campus-specific issues.

The DP was designed to be nimble so we would be able to shift topics if a particularly important issue bubbled up during the semester. In April of 2021, the Derek Chauvin verdict came in 24 hours before our scheduled dialogue on immigration. Emotions were running high, so the DP team decided that the community needed to discuss the verdict. We announced the change in topic 20 hours before we facilitated the dialogue on Zoom. We had 34 participants for an emotional and cathartic dialogue. This was our hope when we designed the dialogue project. We wanted to normalize this type of engagement when the community was struggling.

Once a topic is selected, the team chooses a short (6-minute) video to expose participants to a common text. The designated student facilitating team, the DEI team members, and the faculty in the communication studies department search for short, but informative videos online. We all review the videos and come to consensus on our selection. If we cannot identify a relatively nonpartisan video, we will reach out to a faculty expert to offer a 6-minute lecture on the topic. Students in our dialogue-instructive courses often cite a limited understanding of the topic as the primary reason they choose not to participate in classroom dialogues. We include the short information component, so every participant has a basic understanding of the topic. Once we have the video selected, the facilitating team will develop the breakout group questions and large group questions. One member of the team will prepare the written agenda and bring several copies of the agenda to the dialogue, so each facilitator has a copy of the questions for their breakout group facilitation. Each student facilitator is paired with a faculty member in the communication studies department. In the early days of the project, when we were facilitating on Zoom, three of the communication studies faculty members would partner with a student facilitator in the Zoom breakout rooms, unless the groups got too large, forcing faculty members to facilitate separate breakout rooms. Initially, we made this decision because we did not know how the campus community would receive the dialogues and we wanted to support the student facilitators. Since we moved to in-person dialogues, the numbers have typically demanded that each member of the team facilitate their own breakout group.
Our DEI collaborators reserve the space, order snacks, produce student-focused advertising, and begin each dialogue by sharing our community agreements regarding respectful engagement. Now that we are consistently meeting in-person, we hold the dialogues in the same place every time. We are working to remove any barrier to participation by scheduling at the same time and location each month. Every community member should know where we will meet and how long we will be together. The dialogues always begin at noon and end by 12:50 p.m.

When participants arrive, they are greeted at the door and invited to make a fruit/cheese plate before they take a seat. Many of our participants arrive alone and we want to assure them that they are in the right place, and we are pleased they will be joining us. We hope to ease any concerns that the dialogues are exclusive.

**Community Feedback**

Since fall 2022, participants have received an anonymous online survey seeking feedback regarding their experience. The feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, but we have addressed some concerns to make participation more accessible. For example, one participant brought his lunch to the dialogue and asked that we set up some tables for those with a sack lunch. We added two tables to accommodate those with a lunch. Another participant experienced the informational video as biased, writing,

> CRT was introduced via a WashPo video that showed only pro-CRT content from informed, calm CRT proponents, and only anti-CRT content from reactionary talking heads and state legislatures. Informed, thoughtful criticisms of CRT are certainly out there—and I share some of those—but those were not portrayed. A more thoughtful sharing of reasoned viewpoints across the scope of this issue would have helped it feel like less of a ‘cheering session’ for CRT overall.

This comment has reminded organizers to take more time when selecting videos. We want participants to see their views represented in the content, but we don’t want to suggest there are only two sides to these complicated issues. This DP is intended to help students, faculty, and staff develop habits of mind that allow them to resist simplistic answers to complicated questions. The 50-minute lunch hour schedule makes it possible to attract participants, but constrains the potential impact of the dialogue. We remind participants that this is the beginning of these important discussions, and we encourage them to continue discussing the issues with their friends and colleagues. The tight time limit prompted one survey respondent to express frustration that the small and large group prompt questions did not address their interests. We modified the small and large group prompts by concluding with the question, “What have we not discussed that you think is important?”

The feedback survey also offered an opportunity for participants to describe how they were feeling during the dialogue. One question asked how we could help participants feel more comfortable sharing their views and listening to others. A student participant responded, “I think my discomfort was around the topic itself, which is what I was aiming for. I was not uncomfortable as in I didn’t feel safe in the space, but rather felt uncomfortable in the way the conversation and environment encouraged. It is nerve-wracking being in that situation because of course I don’t want to say anything ‘wrong’ but want to learn and correct myself to grow.” Another student wrote, “Our group was very good about understanding each other’s perspectives and making sure we are asking follow-up questions to further understand each other. It was a
great experience to be a part of.” Although we asked faculty not to require participation, the CRT dialogue fit well into the course content of an education department course, so student teachers were required to participate. Most of the feedback from the students and the instructor indicated that they found the experience enlightening. However, one student indicated, “I don't think there is much anyone could really do, it is basically just me not being comfortable with talking with a large group of people.”

Most staff members indicated that they felt comfortable during the dialogues. One staff responded, “Just having such a large group join and demonstrate openness to the discussion helped me to feel comfortable.” Another staff member described her experience this way, “I’m pretty confident already and I welcome being uncomfortable.”

The faculty responses were more disparate with responses ranging from “I found the dialogue inclusive” and “I felt comfortable” to

"I feel clumsy discussing race. I’m conditioned to feel that it is the kind of topic where one can mistakenly say ‘the wrong thing’ and cause offense. I don't believe any particular individual at [the University] has made me feel this way, but some kind of communal verbal agreement that we are all here to learn, there are no stupid questions, etc. could lessen the tension somewhat.

Faculty with more conservative views described feeling less welcome to share their perspectives. One faculty member reflected on his experience during a dialogue where the driving question was, What does diversity mean at this university?

While I want to be open and welcoming to all kinds of people who are different from me in important ways, that doesn’t mean that I “approve of” all kinds of behaviors, lifestyles, religious beliefs, or moral claims; or consider them equal in value. Rather, I think some lifestyles are morally problematic and some truth claims are incorrect! But I wasn’t comfortable disclosing that in my small group. I don't mean focusing on specific things I disagree with, but rather just having space to discuss that “embracing diversity” doesn’t mean “affirming everybody’s beliefs or choices” (as opposed to affirming their humanity and worth). There was a missed opportunity in this dialogue, either in opening remarks or in choice of small-group questions, to get into that challenging corner of diversity: respecting others in their difference, without embracing or perhaps without even respecting every difference itself.

When we asked participants what they valued about the experience, many indicated that they appreciated that the dialogues included participants from every part of the university. One staff member wrote, “I was impressed by the participation of students, faculty, and staff and the fact that we were all coming together for this event. I wish this could happen more often on campus.” Another staff member appreciated the diversity in their breakout group describing it as, “made up of students, student teachers, staff and someone from another country.” Finally, a student marveled that members of the Administrative Council (including the President and the Provost) joined the dialogue. They valued “The willingness of some to share. I liked that people like [the President] were there to share their thoughts on the topic.”

We specifically asked participants to describe any challenges they faced during the dialogue. Two staff members wished the dialogue was longer. Several of the student participants were frustrated that they could not find the perfect words to articulate their point. One student described their frustration this way,
Everybody is either nervous to speak or doesn’t want to cut anyone off. It would be good to find a way where there would be an assigned person to speak first in the group each time, or some sort of way so that we don’t stare at each other waiting for someone to speak up. I am a White person. I didn’t want to cut off the Black people in my group and speak over them. I also didn’t want to sit there and make them feel like they have to do the work of “educating” me. Silence is fine but I think everyone wanted to get the conversation going after each question but didn’t know how to without overstepping.

Faculty members cited practical challenges related to the quality of audio-visual equipment and the room setup. But one faculty member was frustrated by the tendency of participants to unite around one perspective.

There wasn’t room or time to discuss nuance. Some of the large-group sharing about facing the reality of racial issues seemed to me to conflate “CRT” with “any and all honest discussion of the challenges of racial issues interracial interaction”—which I think is a gross mischaracterization.

The feedback from the community has shaped the way we developed the 2024 dialogues in three specific ways. First, the planning team is careful to frame the issue in a way that does not exclude conflicting perspectives. In one case, we invited an expert on the topic (gun violence in America) to introduce the topic with gun violence research rather than using a potentially polarizing video. Second, several of our larger dialogues included large groups of students from courses that allied with the dialogue topic. The feedback we received from those students indicated that they valued the experience even though they were not originally planning to participate. In the spring of 2024, we experimented with partnering with an academic department to connect our dialogue topic with their annual lecture series. The scholar invited to speak at the lecture introduced the topic at our dialogue and then participated in the dialogue with the larger group. Following the dialogue, organizers received an email from the visiting scholar reflecting on her experience:

What a wonderful program you all have—from the intentional welcome to each participant to the amazing round-room chair circle at the end. Every bit of it exactly the kind of conversation modeling I wish more of us knew how to do. Thank you a thousand times over for including me.

The collaboration was very successful, and we will plan another connection in the 2024–25 academic year. Finally, the survey feedback indicated that the reason participants chose to return to the dialogues was because they felt welcome. We will continue to provide snacks, welcome participants at the door, and help them to find their voice in the small group dialogues. Hospitality that seemed natural to the communication studies students was a primary reason participants returned.

The dialogue project has been well received by the campus community and we have a full schedule of dialogues for fall 2024. We will use the data we gathered from the post-event surveys to inform the path forward. The planning team is currently exploring the possibility of expanding the dialogue project to focus on specific issues facing student, staff, or faculty populations. This may offer the opportunity to facilitate longer dialogues with a deliberation component.
This dialogue project is still young. We are pleased with the way the campus community has embraced our efforts but will bring the team together again in the fall to discuss how we can better meet the needs of our community. Our experience over the past 5 years has taught us that our dialogues are most successful when we nurture a welcoming space where participants feel their voices are heard. To nurture a habit of engagement, dialogues must be predictably organized so community members can relax into the routine (Nagda et al., 2009). Inviting trained student facilitators to guide the experience has allowed faculty, staff, students, and administrators to engage with conflicting ideas rather than confront individual participants (Escobar, 2011). Our goal has been to help our university community become comfortable discussing difficult topics across organizational boundaries. We did not know what to expect when we started this project, but we have been pleased with the results. One of our regular staff participants recently accepted a position at another university. Before she left campus, she sent the following email to the organizers:

I don't expect our paths will cross before I leave campus but wanted to send my thanks for your work on these events—I love them and will definitely miss them and the value that they add to my reflection process. The world needs more of these!

References


Appendix A

Community Agreement (modified March 2024)

Speak from the “I” perspective: Avoid speaking for others by using “we,” “us,” or “them.”

Listen actively: Listen to understand, not to respond.

Step up, step back: If you usually speak less, challenge yourself to bring your voice forward in the conversation. If you usually speak up, challenge yourself to listen with curiosity before you contribute.

Respect silence: It is not necessary to fill silence. Relax into the silence and open a space to think and process.

Share, even if you don’t have the right words: Suspend judgment and allow others to be unpolished in their speaking. If you are unsure of their meaning, then ask for clarification.

Uphold confidentiality: Treat the candor of others as a gift. Assume that personal identities, experiences, and perspectives shared in this space are confidential unless you are given permission to use them.

Lean into discomfort: Learning happens on the edge of our comfort zones. Push yourself to be open to new ideas and experiences even if they initially seem uncomfortable to you.

Embrace conflict: The best dialogues give us a chance to stretch our understanding and create something new together. Treat conflicting ideas as an opportunity to enrich your understanding.

This is a community dialogue. Whether you are student, faculty, staff, or administration, you bring a piece of the puzzle. Share from your experience and listen with curiosity.
Appendix B

Good morning,

You are invited to participate in the final dialogue of the fall on **Wednesday, November 8, at noon**. The DEI office has collaborated with the Communication Studies Department to facilitate campus dialogues on critical issue. All faculty, staff, and students are welcome to participate! The dialogue will begin with a quick video to help participants better understand the topic. Our topic this month: Race in America. Student facilitators will open a space for participants to engage honestly in dialogue.

We ask participants to enter the dialogues ready to listen with curiosity and share generously. Please join us and encourage your friends and colleagues to join us. We work to nurture a space where everyone feels heard and respected. Please bring your own drink, **snacks will be provided. 😊**

**Topic: Race in America**
**Date and time**
**Gathering location**

Best,
Dialogue team members
Appendix C

Agenda for the Dialogue Project

Facilitator Instructions

Thank you for helping our community engage these challenging topics in a healthy way. We will be discussing Gender Fluidity. Arrive 10 minutes early to welcome participants. If you want to encourage participation in your breakout groups, you might ask, “Does anyone have a similar view?” or “Who has a different understanding?”

Agenda

1. 11:50: Student facilitating team (both): Welcome participants as they arrive. Let them know they are in the right place. Encourage them to get snacks and get seated in the theatre-style seating.
2. 12:01: Student facilitator will officially welcome participants.
3. 12:02: DEI representative will share the community agreements.
4. 12:04: Communication faculty will show the video: (video link)
5. 12:09: Student facilitator will explain that we will be in small groups for 20 minutes and then come together as a large group. Use the singing bowl to illustrate what they will hear when they have 1 more minute to finish their conversation.
6. 12:09–12:33: Student facilitator will invite the participants to move into breakout groups. Student facilitator will watch for late arriving participants and welcome them to a group.
7. 12:33–12:45: Student facilitator will invite the group to come together as a large group to discuss ideas inspired by the breakout dialogues. Student facilitator will facilitate the large group. Ask for the final comment at 12:44.
8. 12:45: Student facilitator will thank participants and ask them to continue the discussion after this event. Next dialogue will take place on Wednesday, November 8—Do you have a right to health care?

Questions for the breakouts—Ann will bring the questions and singing bowl.

Facilitation questions for the first breakout:

1. What resonated with you in the video?
2. What questions do you still have about gender fluidity?
3. How do you think college students will talk and think about gender in 20 years?
Questions for the large group (You may only need one of these questions)

Student facilitator: Help the group gather in a large circle unless the group is too large, then encourage them to stay in their small group. Student facilitator will facilitate the full group discussion by posing the first question:

1. What did you discuss in your breakout that you are still thinking about?
2. Did your breakout discussion inspire any questions you would like the entire group to consider?
3. What have we not discussed that you believe is important?

Student facilitator will conclude and thank participants.

Communication faculty member will remind participants that this is just the beginning of the conversation so continue the conversation in classrooms, offices, and residents halls. Participants will be invited to join the next scheduled dialogue.