

COMMUNICATION SKILLS AND OUTCOMES IN INTERGROUP DIALOGUE

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

Department of Communication and Dramatic Arts

Central Michigan University  
Mount Pleasant, Michigan  
October, 2011

Accepted by the Faculty of the College of Graduate Studies,  
Central Michigan University, in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the master's degree

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to thank my God who has been very gracious to me, and my faith family at Grace Church for their support and prayer through this endeavor. Furthermore, I want to thank the members of my thesis committee: Dr. Shelly Hinck, Dr. Mary Ann Renz, and Dr. Edward Hinck. Dr. Shelly Hinck, thank you for your commitment to my project even as you transitioned into your new role as Associate Dean. You offered tremendous support and feedback to help me keep pushing forward. Without your timely feedback, editing, and prodding this project would not be the high quality of work that it is now. Your guidance has greatly enhanced my writing abilities, taking my thesis to a whole new level. Dr. Mary Ann Renz and Dr. Edward Hinck, thank you for your support, insights, and editing help.

I also want to thank my wonderful wife for her endless support through a long writing process that, at times, took its toll. Angie encouraged me when I was weary. She kept me accountable to my work and helped proofread my manuscript. She was a sounding board for me to process ideas. She also consistently made delicious food to keep me going, and helped with housework when I was tied up with writing. Angie, thank you so much! I could not have done this without you.

Finally, I would like to thank my family who has consistently offered words of encouragement and support for my efforts in completing my Master's degree.

## ABSTRACT

### COMMUNICATION SKILLS AND OUTCOMES IN INTERGROUP DIALOGUE

by Adam Agosta

Colleges and universities in America are more diverse today than ever before in history. The increasing diversity has contributed a natural rise in conflict. Regrettably, students are lacking in their ability to communicate across differing worldviews in a way that facilitates mutual understanding. The model students have had for resolving differences has been a largely adversarial model. This model is seen in politics, media, families, and in educational institutions. Contrarily, dialogue is a form of communication that is being used to achieve the purposes of building trust, respect, and mutual understanding between unique individuals. Intergroup dialogue classes are being offered at universities to facilitate productive communication about issues related to racism, sexism, heterosexism, and other “isms” using the skills and principles of dialogue. This study sought to further research on dialogue by gaining a better understanding of the communication skills that are developed in these classes. For this study, students who participated in a pilot intergroup dialogue course at Central Michigan University were interviewed in order to gain qualitative analysis of how dialogic communication skills were developed, and how those skills impacted the outcomes of the group. This research revealed that students learned dialogic skills primarily through class structures, which provided a model for dialogue they were lacking. The use of dialogic skills provided a safe environment wherein relationships developed quickly. Furthermore, overcoming tendencies to put too much focus on self, or on supporting others was a sign of growth in

dialogue skills. Finally, several students developed confidence in communicating about social justice and were empowered with the skills needed to explore differing worldviews.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

American universities are including intergroup dialogue classes in their curriculum in an effort to facilitate productive and meaningful communication across the dividing lines of multiple social identities, not limited to race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age and weight. Some of the universities that now have intergroup dialogue classes include: Michigan, Illinois, Arizona State, Syracuse, California, Maryland, Massachusetts, Texas, and Washington (Rodriquez, 2008). Classes in intergroup dialogue have risen out of a need on college campuses to train students in developing an understanding and acceptance for individuals who are different than they are.

Colleges and universities in America are more diverse today than ever before in history. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2009) showed that the percentage of higher education enrollment for minorities (specifically those who are *female, black, and Hispanic*) rose significantly from 1967 to 2008. In 1967, 33.1% of all males ages 18-24 were enrolled in higher education, compared to the 19.2% of females that were enrolled. By 2008, these numbers drastically changed. Male enrollment only slightly increased to 37%, while the percentage of female enrollment increased to 42%. As for race/ethnicity, 26.9% of all whites, ages 18-24, were enrolled in higher education in 1967, more than double the 13% of blacks that were enrolled. By 2008, 44.2% of whites and 32.1% of blacks enrolled in higher education institutions. Although statistics are not provided for every identity group represented in America, it is likely that other groups (especially minority) have also increased in percentage of population enrolled.

Overall, these statistics reveal a trend of increasing diversity on campuses in the U.S. However, simply having a more diverse population does not automatically cause people to become more socially just.

A natural part of increasing diversity is the increase in conflict, or the “expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals” (Wilmot & Hocker, 2007, p. 9). Each social identity represents unique aspects of individuals that shape their culture, background, values, perspectives and ideas. The combination of these unique individuals naturally leads to the perception of incompatible goals and competition. The conflict that is present when people of differing worldviews come together is complicated and requires specific skills to maintain productive discourse. Regrettably, students are lacking in their ability to communicate across differences in a way that facilitates mutual understanding. Instead, the communication that students have had modeled for them has been much more adversarial.

This generation of students has generally been exposed to communication that is modeled after the form of debate. Whether it is in politics, the media, or families, students have witnessed their role models demonstrate the form of debate as the means to solve seemingly every type of conflict. Debate is a communication form that is rich in history and in value. Much like dialogue, there are certain contexts where the form of debate, applied skillfully, can be the most effective form for the purpose and context of communication. However, for the purposes of building trust, respect and understanding, debate is actually counterproductive. Since debate is focused on winning, and dialogue is

focused on seeking mutual understanding, dialogue situates itself as a more appropriate communication method for navigating the complicated tensions involved with social justice issues.

The current environment on campuses is not notable for its openness. With the increase in diversity, students of different social identities at many universities are becoming more disconnected and closed in their communication with each other. The lack of genuine communication across differences appears to be contributing to further division on college campuses, causing students to be less open to the ‘differentness’ of others, and less skilled at navigating those differences. Superficial contact actually seems to reinforce stereotypes, rather than break them down. Pettigrew and Tropp (2005) argue that mere contact between groups – even under conditions of equality – would naturally breed feelings of suspicion, fear, resentment, disturbance, and in some situations open conflict. Therefore, the result of superficial contact, among other factors, is that campuses are becoming more desegregated and less integrated. Students need to develop their ability and desire to communicate across boundary lines.

Previous research on intergroup dialogue has found that students can develop effective communication skills to effectively navigate differing worldviews. When students are encouraged to communicate with one another in a facilitated environment, research has shown that they increase in their desire and ability to communicate across boundary lines (Nagda, Gurin, Sorensen, & Zuniga, 2009; Wayne, 2008; Zuniga, Nagda, Chesler, & Cytron-Walker, 2007). However, it also appears true that when measures are not taken to encourage communication across differences, prejudice and even hostility

can be the subsequent result. Prejudice has been defined as “an aversive or hostile attitude toward a person who belongs to a group” (Allport, 1979, p. 7). When prejudice for different others is sustained over time and by large numbers of people, it has the potential to lead to outward hostility in the form of hate crimes. In November of 2005, the report, *Hate Crimes Reported by Victims and Police*, was released from the Bureau of Justice Statistics. The report revealed an average annual total of 210,000 hate crimes in the United States from July 2000 through December 2003 (United States Department of Justice Community Relations Service [USDOJ-CRS], 2009). Hatred is dangerous, and colleges have been one of the main sites for such crimes. Colleges should be places where diversity is respected and students learn to work together. Intergroup dialogue classes are one step in that direction, providing a safe place for constructive dialogic communication to occur.

In summary, the current state of diversity, prejudice, and hate crimes, reflected in the data reported, reveals a need for students to develop effective inter-group communication skills. Genuine intergroup communication is needed for understanding to occur. The type of communication known as dialogue has been shown to have the utility needed to turn the tides of hatred, opposition, and ignorance that cause division in America (Zuniga, Nagda, Chesler, & Cytron-Walker, 2007). However, students typically lack an effective model for the skills of dialogue. Therefore, the structure and training provided by intergroup dialogue classes should be valuable for their development. It should be stated that the current research is not proposing dialogue as the only desirable form of communication. Not all communication can be, nor should be dialogic; however,

for fulfilling the need to develop relationships across cultural and ideological gaps, dialogue is precisely the form of communication that is desired. Dialogue aids in the pursuit of mutual understanding, while confirming the humanity of individuals in the process.

There is a rich collection of literature surrounding the topic of dialogue. Nagda (2006) argued that the existing research in intergroup contact has focused primarily on pedagogical and psychological processes. Research focused on pedagogical processes analyzes teaching and learning methodologies applied to intergroup dialogue classes (Nagda, 2006). For instance, this type of research might compare the effectiveness of content-based learning as opposed to active learning. Research focused on psychological processes look at the internal processes within an individual. This type of research might look to see whether the goal of prejudice reduction was met through analyzing the cognitive and emotional processes of individuals in intergroup dialogue courses (Nagda, 2006). Although the focus on pedagogical and psychological processes has been beneficial, Nagda (2006) argued for the importance of a third focus: communication processes “centering on the situational context and interactions people have within the intergroup encounter” (p. 555).

The purpose of the present study is to extend current research by exploring the communication skills that help to make an exchange dialogic. This research seeks to gain useful insight into the nature of intergroup dialogue by analyzing how individuals use communication skills while engaging in difficult conversations about issues related to social justice. To further extend research on dialogue, communication outcomes will also

be examined in this study. Specifically, outcomes of social justice understanding and relational development will be assessed to see how they relate to dialogic communication. Since the purposes of intergroup dialogue classes are to reduce prejudice and develop mutual understanding among students through the means of dialogue, it is proposed in this research that social justice understanding and relationship building are necessary outcomes in order to realize that purpose.

The first chapter of this study will be organized in the following way. First, a review of literature will continue to address the current state of communication on campuses, specifically as it pertains to the need to develop mutual understanding and reduce prejudice. The need for more analysis of dialogue that is focused on communication will also be discussed. Further, the review of literature will provide a better understanding of how the rich philosophies regarding dialogue have evolved. The meaning of dialogue will be discussed using: (1) theoretical understanding from philosophers Martin Buber and Mikhail Bahktin; (2) comparison to other forms of communication; and (3) the characteristics of dialogue. Next, this research will provide a description of the *Intergroup Dialogue Program* that has been used in various forms across the United States. Finally, this chapter will review previous research for three dialogic communication skills: (1) *conflict styles*, (2) *listening*, and (3) *self-disclosure*, as well as two dialogic outcomes – *relational development* and *trust*.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In order to more fully comprehend the current environment on college campuses, the first part of this review of literature will further analyze the need for dialogue. This study has already provided some evidence of the need for dialogue at universities concerning diversity issues. As previously stated, there has been an increase in diversity as well as an increase in isolation. The problem is that students are not equipped to develop relationships with others who look and act differently than they do. Students need training in order to develop the skills necessary for effective communication across social boundary lines. In order to develop these skills, students need more sustained interaction in a safe environment. An environment that allows students to be honest and to become comfortable with different others is very rare on campuses today. The reasons why the environment on campuses today might not be considered safe are largely predictable; it is the solution(s) that might take more contemplation.

#### College Campus Environment

There is limited intergroup interaction on college campuses today. Many factors have contributed to the current social climate on campuses, including prior segregation, stereotyping, in-group favoritism, and intergroup conflict. Limited exposure to other groups before college is one of the main reasons for limited intergroup interaction on campus (Sorensen, Nagda, Gurin & Maxwell, 2009). This prior segregation can weaken the motivation of individuals to participate with other groups (Trevino, 2001). Yet, segregation prior to attending college is only part of the problem. Whenever individuals

from diverse backgrounds come in contact with each other, their different customs, traditions, languages, values, and worldviews are bound to clash, causing conflict and misunderstanding (Trevino, 2001). Intergroup processes such as stereotyping and in-group favoritism can hinder groups from interacting, cooperating, and understanding each other (Trevino, 2001). When individuals are set in their predetermined perceptions of how people from other groups might think or behave, this can lead to avoiding people of a certain group altogether. This only adds to the stigma and difficulty of reaching across social boundaries. In addition to these processes, competition for scarce resources such as financial aid and job opportunities has contributed to a significant amount of conflict in the United States' general population (USDOJ-CRS, 2009). All of these factors are currently working together to keep people divided. The tensions that are naturally created as a result of scarce resources and group differences are not naturally going to be resolved. There must be an intentional effort on behalf of Americans to seek resolution and understanding.

With increasing economic interdependence and diversity in the United States, the need for cultural communication competence is becoming more desperate. Politically our nation is becoming more polarized, which may be reason for individuals avoiding interaction with "others." Tannen (1999) noted that public discourse in America is dominated by adversarial forms of communication. Tannen suggested that an example of this would be the increase in political conservatism and strong challenges against affirmative action. The state of communication in America seems only to be getting worse. Bohm (1999) echoed the sentiments of Tannen, explaining that there has been a

widespread dissatisfaction with the state of affairs that has been described regarding communication today. Bohm (1999) called this state of affairs “the problem of communication” (p. 53). One obstacle contributing to the communication problem in America is the ideology that puts the “self” first.

### *American Individualism*

America is known for its rugged individualism. This way of thinking causes people to seek attention for themselves or have a “self-orientation” (Derber, 1994, p. 64). The self-oriented character type that Derber (1994) described has a highly egocentric view of the world and is motivated primarily by self-interest. Derber stated, “to cope with social and economic insecurity bred by individualism, he becomes preoccupied with himself” (p. 64). In conversation, the self-oriented person repeatedly seeks to turn attention to her- or himself, which Derber termed “conversational narcissism.”

Cissna and Anderson (1994) put forth two forms of individualism: (1) self-contained and (2) ensembled. The American way of self-contained individualism parallels the “self-orientation” of Derber, by maintaining sharp boundaries between self and others to the point of excluding others from self. However, this is not so with ensembled individualism. This type of individualism is marked by more fluid boundaries between self and other, and including others within the self. Ensembled individualism was argued as an appropriate form of individualism for dialogic interaction. The person who embodies ensembled individualism is considered more capable of considering others through processes such as empathy and openness. Therefore, the American ideology of self-contained individualism is another hurdle in the effort towards desegregation.

Taking an “ensembled” approach to interaction is exactly what students’ need as they strive for openness and understanding.

The last aspect of communication that will be discussed includes possibly the greatest contributors to limited intergroup interaction. These communication phenomena could be considered the result of limited interaction as well as the cause for its perpetual state. The processes of prejudice, stereotyping, and totalizing are the mental and linguistic tools that many use to maintain divisive boundaries and express their hatred. These tools can be used unconsciously as well as consciously. The end result is further polarization, which is the antithesis to the goals of intergroup dialogue.

#### *Prejudice, Stereotypes, and Totalizing*

Allport (1979, p. 7) defined prejudice as “an avertive or hostile attitude toward a person who belongs to a group, simply because he [or she] belongs to that group, and is therefore presumed to have the objectionable qualities ascribed to the group.” According to Allport (1979), prejudice is comprised of hostility and rejection based on category. The categorical nature of prejudice is the focus of this section of literature review. Allport explained that categorical rejection is condemning a person based on his or her presumed group membership. This process, which Allport (1979, p. 8) termed *overcategorization*, allows for us to take a “thimbleful of facts [and] rush to make generalizations as large as a tub.” Allport described how this process is natural for humans due to our lack of time and resources to weigh each person in the world individually. Categorizing in this sense might be considered necessary. Allport (1979) claimed that prejudgments (or categorizing) become prejudices if a person does not

reverse a “misconceived judgment” when exposed to new knowledge of that person. Therefore, people are prejudiced when they are set in their perception of someone from a particular group. The fact that this person is not willing to learn and change his or her mind about another from a particular group makes the person prejudiced. The overall effect of prejudice is to “place the object of prejudice at some disadvantage not merited by his own misconduct” (Allport, 1979, p. 9).

Stereotyping is a more narrow process within the overall conception of prejudice. Allport (1979, p. 191) explained that a stereotype is “an exaggerated belief associated with a category. Its function is to justify (rationalize) our conduct in relation to that category.” Wood (1999) shed light on how stereotyping can be reinforced when she described how we might treat an individual who acts outside the stereotype. Those that act outside the stereotype are treated as unusual so as to make it known that people in that particular group should “normally” act according to stereotypes (Wood, 1999). This type of stereotyping has been referred to as spotlighting. An example is calling a medical doctor who is female, a “female doctor,” while no one would ever specify “male doctor,” although “male nurse” is commonly said due to the stereotype lending to nurses only being female. Another lens through which to view prejudice that is similar to stereotyping is what has been termed totalizing (Wood, 1999). Wood (1999, p. 169) explained that totalizing is a type of communicating that “emphasizes one aspect of a person above all others.”

Objectively, the communication acts of prejudice can be seen as unfair and what many have called an injustice. Not only is the communication an injustice, but so also

are the reverberations of that communication that reach to the practical outworkings of society. The effects of prejudice are all-encompassing and interconnected. Although the vast reach of prejudice can be hard to fully grasp, the focus of the current research is on the communication that perpetuates it.

The lack of meaningful interaction between the dividing lines of “categories” is both a result of stereotyping as well as a contributor to it. The circular nature of stereotypes makes it difficult to determine which is first, much like the “chicken and the egg” conundrum. Do stereotypes lead to lack of meaningful interaction, or does lack of meaningful interaction lead to stereotypes? Scholars appear to argue that the quick answer is both (Allport, 1979; Buber, 1970; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2005; Wood, 1999). Lack of meaningful interaction across dividing lines leads to stereotypes and also provides little to no opportunities for correcting those stereotypes. Stereotypes also reinforce those boundary lines and lead to limited meaningful interaction. Enter Intergroup Dialogue (IGD) – The goal of IGD courses is to address both the “chicken” and the “egg”: stereotypes and limited meaningful interaction.

The offense that is caused by prejudice and stereotyping is likely to create barriers to open, healthy communication and comfortable relationships. Long held stereotypes are not easy to break. Bohm (1999) stated that dialogic communication that can lead to the creation of something new is only possible if people are able to listen to each other without any prejudice. Therefore, this research seeks to better understand the communicative measures that can be taken to undo the pattern of prejudice and division on college campuses. Specifically, it is argued that the problems raised here might each

find some resolution in the understanding and practical skill development of dialogic communication. Dialogue is a concept that has had a rich history. Recently (in the past half-century), dialogue has been explored for its benefit in helping people successfully relate to others who are different from them. Dialogue has also been studied as a technique used for seeking to understand and know others in a way that builds understanding and allows for depth of relationship. Yet, the definition of dialogue has not had the clear, singular focus that might be expected.

Over the years, the definition of dialogue has evolved. Scholars have applied multiple variations of meaning to the term. Penman (2000) described an experience at a 1999 International Communication Association conference where she attended several sessions with “dialogue” in the title only to discover that there existed almost as many different usages of the word as sessions held. One early conception of dialogue was as a conversation between two or more people or between the characters in a novel or play (Stewart & Logan, 1999). This conception of dialogue has been evident even in recent years. Markova and Foppa (1990) defined dialogue as a “face-to-face interaction between two or more persons using a system of signs” (p. 1). The simple face-to-face exchange of signs portrays dialogue at its most basic level. However, recently new meaning to the word and its practice has arisen, suggesting that there is more to dialogue than simply conversation.

### Theoretical Ground of Dialogue

As previously stated, dialogue is addressed in a vast body of research that has varied in definitions and approaches employed. In response to this reality, the current

research will provide a foundational understanding of dialogue by discussing the ideas of two key philosophers. These philosophers have made significant contributions to the paradigm of dialogue that is maintained in this study. The two philosophers are Martin Buber (1875-1965) and Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975).

### *Martin Buber*

Buber is one of the most prominent philosophers to explore the construct of dialogue. His description of *I-Thou* relating sets the standard for those who study dialogue in relationships. According to Buber (1970), *I-Thou* relating often occurs only in moments due to its intensity. *I-Thou* relating is “characterized by mutuality, directness, presentness, intensity, and ineffability” (Friedman, 2002, p. 65). Buber (1970) contrasts the *I-Thou* relation with the other primary attitude of humans, *I-It*. The *I-It* attitude takes place within a man/woman and not between him/her and the world. This attitude is focused on experiencing more than relating. According to Buber (1970), most of life is spent in the *I-It* attitude, making *I-Thou* relating rare. Although *I-Thou* is uncommon, Buber (1970) maintained it is still a necessary site for humans relating in a way that allows them to fully be in the present, meeting as they really are, without pretense. Buber emphasized this point repeatedly in his writing. He was convinced that the uncommon moments of *I-Thou* relating were the “cradle of real life” (Friedman, 2002, p. 66), where no deception could penetrate. Buber posited that dialogue could be a remedy to the powerful force of hatred. Buber claimed that hate generally sees only part of who a person is.

Buber depicted the dialogic *I-Thou* relating as a risky endeavor: “The moments of the *Thou* are strange lyric and dramatic episodes, seductive and magical, but tearing us away to dangerous extremes, loosening the well-trying context, leaving more questions than satisfaction behind them, shattering security” (as cited in Friedman, 2002, p. 68). Buber claimed that entering into genuine relation is an act of the whole being. In a statement that seems paradoxical to this, he also claimed “Only when every means has collapsed does the meeting come about” (Friedman, 2002, p. 66). Therefore, it appears the dialogic *I-Thou* relating that Buber described involves effort of the whole being to restrain the ego, give up the false self and ulterior goals, and seek to know and be known. Buber asserts that entering into genuine relation in this form is “...*the* act by which we constitute ourselves as human, and it is an act which must be repeated ever again in ever new situations” (as cited in Friedman, 2002, p. 68). According to Buber, the effort and risk involved in creating moments of genuine dialogue are worth the investment, producing love and self/other awareness that truly allow humans to ‘become’ and experience the real life that resides in relationship.

*The sphere of between.* Buber described a sphere that exists between two people where meaning is mutually created. “When two people ‘happen’ to each other, there is an essential remainder which is common to them, but which reaches out beyond the special sphere of each” (Friedman, 2002, p. 98). Both partners must participate for this sphere to exist. Buber calls the unfolding of this sphere ‘the dialogical’ (Friedman, 2002, p. 98). The meaning of the dialogue is neither in an individual, nor in the partners together, but rather in the sphere between – where individuals are mutually creating. This

is why dialogue and genuine relating are risky. As participants allow themselves to 'happen' apart from ego and other means, there is a sphere or realm of possibility that is not normally there. There is possibility for thinking, believing, and/or saying something that one might not normally allow oneself to think, believe, or say, with ego in charge. Buber described the duality of being and seeming in the sphere of between using two categories of people: "essence [person]" and "image [person]" (Friedman, p. 98). The essence person looks at the other as one to whom one gives themselves. S/he is not uninfluenced by the desire to make her/himself understood, but also has no thought for the conception of her/himself that s/he might awaken in the beholder. The image person is primarily concerned with what the other thinks of him/her. For Buber, the goal of dialogic interaction is to pursue being, or "essence" over seeming, "image."

*Delivery: Avoiding deformed conversation.* Buber argued that, even in an atmosphere of genuine conversation, if the thought of one's effect as speaker outweighs the thought of what the other has to say, then one inevitably works as a destroyer (Friedman, 2002). This description matches the form of communication previously described as debate. Friedman (2002) further explained the thoughts of Buber, stating that because genuine conversation is "an ontological sphere, which constitutes itself through the authenticity of being, every intrusion of appearance can injure it" (p. 100). Therefore, if a person is concerned about his/her appearance more than authenticity in conversation "one irreparably deforms what one has to say: it enters deformed into the conversation, and the conversation itself is deformed" (p.100). Unlike deformed conversation, the essential element of genuine dialogue is 'seeing the other' or

‘experiencing the other side’ (Buber as cited in Friedman, 2002, p. 101). These descriptions of communicating in dialogue might appear to be completely selfless in their nature. However, Buber described experiencing the other as both considerate of the other and of the self.

Friedman (2002) described Buber’s ideas about delivery in dialogue stating, “not holding back is the opposite of letting oneself go, for true speech involves thought as to the way in which one brings to words what one has in mind” (p. 100). Each person in a dialogue must be ready to share. Yet, no one who participates can know in advance if he or she will or will not have something to say (Friedman, 2002). Therefore, open vulnerability must be combined with thoughtful intention to communicate effectively in dialogue. Sharing openly should be done without completely removing the filter of thought.

*Primary tension of dialogue.* Dialogue, for Buber, is the label for the quality of contact that exists for humans in tension between instrumental and objective contact. There is a tension between letting go of personal ideas and feelings, while at the same time considering what you have to offer others and the desired outcomes of a dialogue. This tension between holding your own ground and letting the other happen to you is a common thread throughout current research on dialogue (Stewart & Logan, 1999; Zediker & Stewart, 1999). Zediker and Stewart (1999) described this tension as the primary tension involved in dialogue. They argued that moments of dialogue come about most often when the people involved maintain this primary tension. Letting the other happen to you occurs “when you allow who they are – especially their differences from

you – to touch, connect with, and influence you” (Zediker & Stewart, 1999, p. 560).

Therefore, the opportunity for genuine dialogue is a reality when we can experience others as unique individuals and not just extensions of ourselves.

Holding your ground occurs “when you assert yourself or say exactly what’s on your mind” (Zediker & Stewart, 1999, p. 561). Zediker and Stewart (1999) explained that the idea of holding your ground strongly resembles the construct of assertiveness. Alberti and Emmons (as cited in Zediker & Stewart, 1999) described assertiveness as a behavior that “promotes equality in human relationships, enabling us to act in our best interests, to stand up for ourselves without undue anxiety, to express honest feelings comfortably, to exercise personal rights without denying the rights of others” (p. 562). Buber (1970) further described the grounds for dialogue stating “no purpose intervenes between I and You, no greed and no anticipation; and longing itself is changed...Every means is an obstacle. Only where all means have disintegrated encounters occur” (p. 63). ‘...Every means is an obstacle...’ describes the way individuals can have pretense and hidden motivation in their communication. Therefore, it is only when we have let go of our previous understanding and notions of what we already know and who we will be in the interaction, that we are able to approach others dialogically. Abraham Kaplan (1994) described this same aspect of dialogue stating, “when people are in communion, when they are in this narrow sense really communicating with one another, the content of what is being communicated does not exist prior to and independently of that particular context. There is no message, except a post-hoc reconstruction” (p. 9). Therefore, if two

people are truly communicating dialogically, neither has come prepared with an idea of what they will say, rather what is shared comes out of genuinely relating to one another.

*Genuine relationship.* Buber described dialogue as a form of genuine relationship. Buber (1970, p. 19) wrote, “there is a genuine dialogue – no matter whether spoken or silent – where each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular beings and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them.” According to Buber, this genuine relationship occurs in the uncommon moments of dialogue.

Scholars have argued that the Greek term *dia-logos* does not simply mean “two people talking,” but rather “meaning through” (Buber, 1970; Isaacs, 1999; Stewart & Logan, 1999). The emphasis in recent conceptions of dialogue is that meaning or understanding is collaboratively co-constructed by all of the individuals involved in the dialogue. This implies that no single person involved in the dialogue has control of what comes out of the communicating. The effort of forming mutual understanding and connection with “others” is what Buber explained to be waning away in modern society.

Since there are many human inventions and institutions that place obstacles in the way of this kind of contact, it is not commonplace. Yet, according to Buber it still remains the site of human becoming. Buber (1970) believed that if dialogue were appropriately facilitated, its quality of contact could enhance understanding, learning, medicine, family life, business, politics, and recreation. Based on Buber’s analysis, it would be appropriate to assume that effectively facilitated and enacted dialogue could

create bridges of understanding between different groups that are becoming increasingly polarized in the United States and across the world.

*Mikhail Bakhtin*

Bakhtin and Buber had very similar thinking about dialogue even though these thoughts were not commonplace among the field of scholars in their day. For Bakhtin, much like Buber, dialogue was not merely the alternation of communication roles, but also the way that the other is incorporated into one's own utterance. According to Cissna and Anderson (1994), these "dialogic reverberations" (in Bakhtin's terms) arise not only because the utterance is an undeniable link in the communication chain that cannot be broken from previous links, but also because the utterance is related to future links. An understanding of dialogic reverberation lays the groundwork for what Bakhtin called the dialogic formula of responsiveness. Bakhtin posited that this dialogic responsiveness is necessary for dialogic communication to occur.

*Dialogic formula of responsiveness.* Bakhtin's dialogic formula of responsiveness mirrors many of the concepts from Buber. According to Bakhtin (as cited in Perlina, 2003, p. 109), a person who possesses "only his own word" is unable to access the words of others. This monologist, as described by Bakhtin, would assume only one diametrical opposition: myself versus another person. Buber (1970, pp. 80-81) put forth that in this opposition "the *I* assumes a position before things, but does not confront them in the current of reciprocity." Therefore, Bakhtin's internally persuasive word, "the discourse that strives to determine the very basis of our ideological interrelations with the world, the very basis of our behavior" is the *Thou* of Buber's system. In Buber (1970, p.

81), the *Thou* “receives its place, its course, its measurability and conditionality” as a result of the reciprocal confrontation with the *I*. In Bakhtin, the person’s own word achieves the finalizing meaning of a fully weighted concept only as a result of reciprocal confrontation and response to the words of others.

*Creative understanding.* Bakhtin described a form of understanding that “does not renounce itself, its own place in time, or its own culture; and it forgets nothing. (Shields, 2003, p. 387). According to Bakhtin, it is not the “empathetic union of I and the other that characterizes responsibility, but the absolute difference that summons the charity of non-indifference” (Shields, 2003, p. 386). The concept of creative understanding parallels the primary tension of dialogue (Buber, 1970; Zediker & Stewart, 1999). Through creative understanding, each individual is able to retain his or her own identity, yet they are mutually enriched. Shields (2003) used the metaphor of marriage to represent the concept of creative understanding. In marriage, each partner ideally embraces the other’s differentness, and they are both enriched from that differentness. Bakhtin put forth that creative understanding depends on this relation of difference, that embracing differentness is necessary for any mutual understanding to spring forth (Shields, 2003).

### *Comparing Communication Forms*

The ideas of Buber and Bakhtin have provided a theoretical basis for understanding the nature of dialogue. Yet, further clarity as to the praxis of dialogue is needed. Possibly the most helpful way to conceptualize the practice of dialogue is to compare it to other forms of communicating. Many researchers have provided useful

comparison of dialogue to monologue, discussion, and debate (Cissna & Anderson, 1994; Herzig & Chasin, 2006; Zediker & Stewart, 1999; Zuniga, Nagda, Chesler, & Cytron-Walker, 2007). It is in comparing these different forms that the unique utility of each can be understood. The brief comparison of communication forms that follows will reinforce the claim that has been implied: That dialogue is uniquely fashioned for the distinctive purposes found in the intergroup dialogue.

*Dialogue vs. monologue.* Zediker and Stewart (1999) provided insight into the meaning of dialogue by distinguishing between “dialogue” and “monologue.” Monologic communication is reminiscent of one of the earliest conceptions of communication, which depicts a message being sent from the “sender” to the “receiver,” and evolving to the receiver “becoming” the “sender” to send a message back. In this conception of communication, there is little emphasis upon listening – not to mention listening to create mutual understanding. Zediker and Stewart (1999, p. 558) explained monologic communication as “when I am only focused on getting my own ideas out and you are not listening, but ‘reloading’ – only working out your response to my ideas.”

*Dialogue vs. discussion.* Discussion could be considered simply a combination of monologues. In a bad discussion, “one listens only to be able to insert one’s own perspective” (Rodriguez, 2008). Discussion is centered on content, not the emotions related to the content. Rodriguez (2008) claimed that discussion tends to contribute to the formation of an abstract or counterfeit notion of community. This is because parties are not often engaging with the perspectives and words of others to affirm them; rather

they tend to pay attention to their own ideas. Discussion can be open or close-ended, resulting in multiple perspectives and/or reaching agreement.

*Dialogue vs. debate.* Dialogue differs from debate, where in debate one person tries to persuade another person(s) of the correctness of her or his position as well as the incorrectness of the other position (Zuniga et al., 2007). In this way, debate is considered an oppositional form of communication that creates at least two sides of an issue. Unlike dialogue, debate always assumes there is a right answer and that each side should present the best case possible to prove they are right (Rodriguez, 2008). In debate, listening is often for the purpose of finding flaws in the other person's argument. The ultimate end goal of debate is to win, implying that there is a decision made. Since dialogue does not simply assume there is always one right answer, it remains an open-ended experience in which meaning is created by the joint effort of the participants. Compared to the communication forms of monologue, discussion and debate, dialogue is set apart with its unique characteristics that help facilitate the mutual efforts of partners.

*Characteristics of dialogue.* In an effort to create a wider conceptual framework for dialogue than is found in previous works from scholars and philosophers like Buber and Bakhtin, Cissna and Anderson (1994) described dialogue as having eight main characteristics: (1) Immediacy of presence, (2) Emergent unanticipated consequences, (3) Recognition of strange otherness, (4) Collaborative orientation, (5) Vulnerability, (6) Mutual implication, (7) Temporal flow, and (8) Genuineness and authenticity.

*Immediacy of presence* is described as being present and available without the desire to orchestrate specific outcomes. This is in contrast to both debate and discussion.

In debate there is an overt effort to orchestrate desired outcomes as both parties seek to win. In discussion there is a focus on one's own ideas, which leads to a proliferation of monologues. *Emergent unanticipated consequences*, emphasizes the reality that dialogue is not predictable and is more an act of improvisation. *Recognition of strange otherness* is the refusal to assume one already knows the thoughts, feelings, and intentions of others, even if this person has been a friend for life. This recognition is often absent in debate, where opponents have studied the potential arguments of each other and assume they know their thoughts and intentions. *Collaborative orientation* is having a high level of concern for self as well as for the other. Having a collaborative orientation is not part of any of the previously mentioned communication forms that have only a self-focus. *Vulnerability* involves willingness to be open about one's own thoughts, while also allowing the thoughts of others to influence them. This is a key tenet to dialogue that coincides with the collaborative orientation. While monologue and discussion include communicators being open about their own thoughts, they exclude allowing the influence of others. In debate, communicators are neither open about their own thoughts nor open to the genuine influence of their opponents. *Mutual implication* entails all speakers incorporating the utterances of the other(s) into their own speech. The *temporal flow* of dialogue refers to the fact that dialogue "emerges from the past, fills the immediate present, and anticipates an open future" (p. 15). Finally, *genuineness and authenticity* are the characteristics by which participants presume that others are speaking honestly. In dialogue, significant and persistent thoughts and feelings relevant to the relationship are not deliberately hidden. Buber referred to this characteristic as "being" rather than

“seeming.” Ultimately the end goal in dialogue is to gain understanding through creating meaning together. Therefore, more than any other form of communication, dialogue is precisely what is needed to address the problems presented in this study.

To emphasize a statement already made in this paper, dialogue is not the only desirable form of communication – and not all communication can be, nor should be dialogic. Other forms of communication may have their place such as the previously mentioned forms of discussion – as with a group of friends, and structured debate – as with forensics, mediation, problem solving, etc. Dialogue is a unique form of communication that satisfies human needs and is vital for confirmation. Buber (1970) described how dialogue can be confirming using a concept he termed “human becoming.” Human becoming is contrasted with human being, in that it involves the effort of coordinating with others, rather than being stagnant and unwilling to engage in this coordination of mutual understanding. It is this effort to engage in coordinating with others that marks the type of interaction desired in the context of intergroup dialogue. This in-depth coordination typifies dialogue as it has been defined in this study. Dialogue in its purest form is very rare. Even when individuals are using skills that would be considered “dialogic,” the term dialogue should be reserved for the moments of genuine relating that are often fleeting. Although dialogue is not the preferred form of communication for every context, intergroup dialogue programs provide settings that warrant this coordinated effort towards mutual understanding.

## Intergroup Dialogue (IGD)

Programs for creating dialogue are becoming increasingly common in the United States. They can be found on college campuses, youth organizations, churches, neighborhood groups, and even globally with peace efforts. Some are offered as a class; others are conducted as workshops or retreats or part of a residential learning experience. These dialogic experiences are most productive when they are facilitated (either by trained peers or veteran instructors), have a clear purpose or objective, and are sustained or ongoing. Topics for dialogue programs are wide-ranging, but a common impetus is bringing people together for an honest, open exchange about difficult or controversial issues. Intergroup dialogue programs have specifically focused on issues of identity, oppression, and conflict resolution. This focus has risen out of the ever-increasing issues related to social identities and the hatred that divides these individuals. This trend is especially common on college campuses where many different social groups are brought together.

The underlying goal of intergroup dialogue programs is to create outcomes of prejudice reduction and social inclusion (Nagda, 2006). Classes for intergroup dialogue are most often designed to bring “members of two or more social identity groups together to address issues of difference across gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, religion, nationality and other social groups” (Zuniga & Nagda, 2001, p. 306). Wayne (2008) similarly described intergroup dialogue courses as a “face-to-face, sustained, facilitated communication undertaken to build relationships and consider difficult issues affecting members of different social identity groups” (p. 452). The most obvious distinction in

these explanations of intergroup dialogue programs is the inclusion of different social identity groups coming together. Also, the fact that intergroup dialogue involves a process, and not simply an isolated encounter with someone, allows for “open space in which people can engage with one another honestly and seriously with a desire to understand and care rather than to win or lose” (Zuniga et al., 2007, p. 14). Dialogue in this format has many unique defining characteristics. In order to further clarify the meaning of dialogue that is utilized in this study, a description of the defining characteristics of intergroup dialogue programs is needed.

*IGD characteristics.* Zuniga et al. (2007) described the defining characteristics of intergroup dialogue programs as having a critical dialogical approach, a reliance on sustained communication and involvement, and an intergroup focus. A critical dialogical approach is explained by Zuniga et al. (2007, p. 11) as a method of providing information and guided facilitation that encourages students to “question personal biases and preconceptions and begin to understand each other’s perspectives and experiences in a larger social context.” A reliance on sustained communication is needed because genuine relationships take time to develop. This appears to be especially true in the context of bringing people from multiple identity groups together. What makes intergroup dialogue programs different than other dialogue programs is the “intergroup” focus. The basic assumptions of intergroup dialogue programs are that interpersonal and cross-group relations on campuses are affected by the histories and current realities of intergroup conflict in the United States, and that these conflicts must be explored through dialogic encounters. Overall, intergroup dialogue programs utilize the aforementioned

characteristics to “foster a critical examination of the impact of power relations and social inequality on intergroup relations” (Zuniga et al., 2007, p. 3). Therefore, intergroup dialogue programs offer a safe and intentional opportunity for individuals to seek understanding of themselves and others from different social groups.

*IGD programs.* Efforts for intergroup dialogue are being made in the public sector. One group known as the Public Conversations Project (PCP) has a mission to “guide, train, and inspire individuals, organizations, and communities to constructively address conflicts relating to values and worldviews” (Public Conversations Project, 2010). PCP formed in 1989 when founder Laura Chasin, a family therapist, responded to a televised debate about abortion (Public Conversations Project, 2010). As a result of the debate, Chasin began to rethink how family therapy practices could improve polarized conversations about abortion and other public issues. PCP incorporates the principles of dialogue, family therapy, psychology, and deliberation to facilitate healthy “conversations” nationally and globally (Public Conversations Project, 2010). PCP has worked in fifteen countries to reduce destructive conflict and enhance communication. PCP believes “dialogue can lay the groundwork for making decisions or significant collaborative actions” (Public Conversations Project – History, 2010). The PCP offers many services to fulfill its mission. These services include designing and facilitating dialogues, workshops, free dialogue resources, and consultation about the methods and resources endorsed by the PCP. The following quotation has become a statement of inspiration to PCP for the need and utility of intergroup dialogue:

In this world of polarizing conflicts, we have glimpsed a new possibility: a way in which people can disagree frankly and passionately, become clearer in heart and mind about their activism, and, at the same time, contribute to a more civil and compassionate society. (Fowler, Gamble, Hogan, Kogut, McComish, & Thorp, 2001)

This quotation is from the article “Talking with the enemy” that was published in *The Boston Globe*, January 28, 2001. The article described a small group of both pro-life and pro-choice leaders in the Boston area who engaged in an extended dialogue that was stretched out over six years. The dialogue brought understanding and appreciation of those that would have previously been labeled as enemies.

In addition to the public sphere, there are a number of colleges and universities around the United States that have developed programs for intergroup dialogue. Many have collaborated in their development of intergroup dialogue programs. Recently, nine colleges and universities in the United States have combined efforts in what is called the “Multi-University Project” (Rodriguez, 2008). The project involves combined research and the sharing of ideas. The universities involved in this project and the names of their programs are as follows: Michigan (IGR), Illinois (IGD), Arizona State (IGR), Occidental College (IGD), Syracuse (IGD), California (IGD), Maryland (Words of Encouragement), Massachusetts (Social Justice Education), Texas (IGD), and Washington (IDEA) (Rodriguez, 2008).

*Intergroup Relations program (IGR) at U of M.* The program at the University of Michigan (U of M) provides a useful model for universities to follow. The U of M

program has produced outcomes that satisfy many of the objectives put forth by the CMU program. The IGR program is a social justice education program that seeks to address issues relating to oppression. Multiple departments at the university work together to promote understanding of intergroup relations inside and outside of the classroom (Intergroup Relations, 2009). Courses are offered that are distinguished by their “experiential focus, teaching philosophy, and incorporation of dialogical models of communication” (Intergroup Relations, 2009). One of the courses offered by IGR is Intergroup Dialogue. The Intergroup Dialogue course is structured to explore social group identity, conflict, community, and social justice. The core goals for the Intergroup Dialogue course include “consciousness raising, building relationships across differences and conflicts, and strengthening individual and collective capacities to promote social justice” (Zuniga et al., 2007, p. 9). Each section of the Intergroup Dialogue course includes identity groups defined by race, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic class, gender, sexual orientation, or national origin. Each identity group is represented in the dialogue by a balanced number of student participants, usually 5-7 participants from each group. Trained student facilitators encourage dialogue rather than debate. Students are assigned reading materials to examine and discuss that address issues and experiences relevant to the groups in the dialogue. These issues are discussed in relation to both the University setting and general society. The end goal is that facilitators and participants will have explored similarities and differences across groups, and worked toward building a multicultural and democratic community. The IGR program at U of M provides evidence for the effectiveness of intergroup dialogue programs.

*Outcomes of IGR.* Research was conducted at U of M to look at the impact of the intergroup dialogue program. First-year students enrolled in an intergroup dialogue course were given a pre-test before taking the course as well as a post-test in their fourth year at the university (Zuniga et al., 2007). The results from these students were compared to a control group of students who did not take the class. Lopez, Gurin, and Nagda (as cited in Zuniga et al., 2007, p. 64) found that students who took the course thought “more structurally about racial and ethnic inequalities than did their counterparts.” To think “more structurally” was described as understanding the systemic and institutional structures that society has in place that create injustice, and seeking solutions. Further, when given intergroup conflict scenarios, the students who took the IGD course supported more structural actions to correct gender and racial inequality. This is evidence that the IGD course raised student’s awareness of the problems and systematic solutions associated with social justice and diversity.

Additional outcomes were revealed in the previously mentioned Multi-University Project, of which U of M was a part. In this study, students showed greater increases than the control group in the following areas: their (1) levels of awareness for others facing inequality; (2) empathy; (3) motivation to bridge differences, (3) intergroup collaboration, (4) desire and frequency in taking action, and (5) post-college commitment to helping address inequality (Nagda, Gurin, Sorensen, & Zuniga, 2009). Based on these outcomes, it can be concluded that the IGR has been effective in achieving the three core goals of “consciousness raising, building relationships across differences and conflicts, and strengthening individual and collective capacities to promote social justice” (Zuniga

et al., 2007, p. 9). The successes of IGR and similar programs from other schools has inspired individuals at Central Michigan University (CMU) to pursue a program of their own. The outcomes that were reached at U of M are needed at CMU – where walls of segregation remain thick, and efforts to engage in mutual understanding appear to be minimal.

### Need For Dialogue at CMU

The current state of diversity at CMU reveals a need for education and intergroup communication. Fifty-five percent of on-campus undergraduates at CMU reported that they attended no events with a minority focus (Report Card on the State of Diversity at CMU, 2004-2008). Students indicated they are only sometimes given the opportunity to discuss diverse perspectives in class through discussion or writing assignments. Students also reported rarely making the effort to engage in “serious conversations” with other students of a different race or ethnicity. These statistics show that students at CMU are not currently engaging in dialogue at the frequency or depth needed build understanding and positive relationships across social boundaries. Although there are zero hate crimes cited in the CMU report, some instances have appeared to go unnoticed. For example, during a meeting of CMU’s Academic Senate on November 20, 2007, presiding member Tim Hartshorne stated the following:

This has been a troubling Fall semester in terms of hate. There have been fliers disparaging Native Americans and Muslims. Last week four nooses were found in a classroom. The student who claimed responsibility for the nooses has

pleaded ignorance. Ignorance of diversity and issues of diversity and culture is not acceptable at an institution of higher learning.

Genuine intergroup communication is needed for understanding to occur. The intergroup dialogue program at CMU is an effort to create understanding across boundary lines. The program seeks to provide an opportunity for genuine communication in a safe environment. It is desired that this effort to facilitate genuine dialogue at CMU should have the effect of breaking down the walls that separate individuals and building understanding between them.

*Intergroup Dialogue program (IGD) at CMU.* The pilot course at CMU was very similar to IGR in pedagogy, dialogic principles, social justice focus, and topics discussed. Much like the U of M model, the CMU IGD course (COM 255b) sought to bring together a diverse group(s) of students that represented multiple identities and backgrounds from which to discuss social justice issues. COM 255b used facilitators, much like the IGR model at U of M, but with some differences. For the CMU COM 255b course, the class was split into two different dialogue groups. The first hour of the three-hour class included lecture shared by multiple faculty members on the topic of theories and models of discrimination and of social justice. Following the lecture the larger class then split into their assigned groups of about 6-10 people. This group time consisted of approximately two hours of peer-facilitated discussion, where trained student facilitators encouraged the use of dialogic principles to discuss social justice issues – mirroring the IGR model.

The goals of the CMU IGD course, as explained in the courses syllabus, were as follows: (1) Prepare students to competently engage and interact with people who are different than they are on a variety of criteria; (2) Develop a better understanding of how social and cultural factors create differences in our society and how these differences impact us and our personal interactions with others; (3) Develop a better understanding of the different forms of discrimination and how they intersect; (4) Students demonstrate an understanding of social justice; and (5) Students develop the ability to apply the material covered in class to current events and issues. Evidence that these goals are rooted in the dialogical approach is found in the fact that three of the goals that are stated use the word “understanding.” In dialogue the main purpose is to seek mutual understanding. Each of these goals seems to imply that they would be difficult to meet without the use of dialogic principles.

Research has shown that there are a number of important factors involved in creating the fertile ground needed for dialogue to occur. Some research has focused on the climate, emotions, and the right mix of people (Nagda, 2006; Wayne, 2008; Zediker & Stewart, 1999; Zuniga & Nagda, 2001). Others have focused on the preparation of the facilitators, the structure of the dialogue, and dissemination of educational materials that focus on diversity and communication skills (Cissna & Anderson, 1999; Sorensen, Nagda, Gurin & Maxwell, 2009; Zuniga & Chesler, 1993; Zuniga et al., 2007). However, there has been very little research that shows the direct impact that developing communication skills may have on the quality of dialogue and the unique atmosphere of trust and openness that allows for ally building and understanding.

According to Pearce and Pearce (2004), until recently, the study of communication has appeared to have little impact on the development of thought and practice of dialogue. It is argued that “none of the seminal figures in dialogue formally studied communication and none based their thinking about dialogue on theories of communication” (Pearce & Pearce, 2004, p. 39). Even though communication has recently been the focus of some of the research regarding dialogue, there is currently limited data that connects the role of communication skills in creating dialogic opportunity. For the newly developing intergroup dialogue program at CMU, there is a need to gather assessment data that will help to clarify how and to what degree communication skills ought to be the focus of dialogic training in the class.

As mentioned previously, most scholars conceive dialogue as something that is very rare and that cannot be planned (Buber, 1970; Friedman, 2002; Perlina, 2003). With that in mind, it would be presumptuous to assume that one could learn the “skills” or “keys” to dialogue and then automatically start up a dialogic conversation with another, as with the flip of a switch. There is more to dialogic interaction than simply communication skills. Yet, as Pearce and Pearce (2004) state, the communication perspective is a realization that communication is substantial and that its properties have consequences. Zuniga et al. (2007, p. 14) summarized the purpose and process of intergroup dialogue, stating:

By actively listening to one another, sharing personal experiences and views, asking and answering difficult questions, and questioning each other’s ideas and

beliefs, participants in intergroup dialogue gain perspective into each other's worlds and explore the social context in which they live.

Based on this statement, there are great implications for the effective use of communication skills in dialogue, and the preferred outcomes that may result.

Previous research suggests that developing communication skills pertinent to dialogic interaction will naturally create opportunities for more genuine dialogue. In the present study, it is proposed that even though one cannot "make" dialogue happen, a person can become equipped with the communication skills and an understanding of the basic elements of dialogue that, in effect, create more consistent opportunities for genuine dialogic interaction. Also, it seems likely that there is a converse relationship between communication skills and dialogue. Participating in dialogue will likely lead to a development of communication skills. Increased communication skills will likely form relationships. Relational development may be an indication of the occurrence of genuine dialogue and achieving the intended outcome of creating mutual understanding through intergroup dialogue.

For the present study, three skills were initially chosen for analysis, representing what seemed to be the most relevant communicative acts for the context of intergroup dialogue. Previous research has provided some description of these skills that help to frame the current study. This study will contribute to current literature by furthering the understanding of these communication skills within the unique context of dialogue.

## Communication Skills and Outcomes in Intergroup Dialogue

The following communication skills will be reviewed: (1) *conflict styles*, (2) *listening*, and (3) *self-disclosure*. Furthermore, in order to measure the effectiveness of the dialogue, two relational outcomes will be discussed: (4) *relational development* and (5) *trust*. This section will conclude with research questions that are guiding the current study.

### *Conflict Styles*

Wilmot and Hocker (2007) produced a definition of conflict that has been used by many scholars to conceptualize this complex communication phenomenon. They defined conflict as “an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals” (Wilmot & Hocker, 2007, p. 9). According to this definition, intergroup dialogues have great potential for conflict. The people involved in intergroup dialogue are usually from different backgrounds and classifications, including race, gender, sexual orientation, culture, religion, family type, etc. Therefore, it is likely that the individuals have different beliefs that lead to incompatible goals. It may also be perceived that those on the other side of an issue are contributing to the scarce resources and interference in achieving one group’s goals. The conflicts can actually get more complicated in a group setting because there may be multiple people supporting one view (allies), yet still hold different beliefs within that view from their ‘allies.’ The polarizing nature of intergroup conflict becomes very clear when there are large discrepancies for those who are supposedly holding the same view. Therefore, intergroup dialogue may even have value

for bringing about understanding of ‘others’ who are allies on a particular issue or belief. Whether allies or not, knowing how to use appropriate conflict styles may offer students engaging in dialogue more insight to resolve intergroup conflict in a constructive way.

Wilmot and Hocker (2007) explained that perception is really at the center of all conflict analysis. They discuss how people involved in interpersonal conflict tend to react as though one of the following might be true: (1) they have genuinely different goals, (2) they have inadequate resources, or (3) the other person is getting in the way of something prized by the perceiver. These conditions may or may not be accurate, but distinguishing between what is perceived and what is accurate in reality is the basis of conflict analysis. When conflicts remain muddled and unclear, they cannot be “re-solved” or solved in a different way (Wilmot & Hocker, 2007). Even though interpersonal perceptions are the “bedrock upon which conflicts are built,” only when these perceptions manifest themselves in communication will an interpersonal conflict emerge (p. 10). Moreover, communication is not only the means through which interpersonal conflict emerges, but also the means by which it is resolved. Consequently, the skills of conflict communication are needed if students ever hope to improve in the ability to manage conflict and improve intergroup dialogue interaction.

Although Wilmot and Hocker (2007) claimed that constructive conflict skills can be learned, many people have never seen these conflict approaches modeled or had someone teach them the necessary skills. Gottman (1994), known for his work with conflict in marriage, found, after decades of research on conflict in marriage, that couples who stay together do the following: enter conflict gently, make repairs along the way

when they wound each other, avoid criticizing and blaming, and avoid criticizing each other where they know it hurts. Gottman (1994) concludes that trust must be maintained in conflict. This research by Gottman supports the need for knowing and implementing the proper skills for conflict management. The skills of conflict management are not intuitively obvious. Wilmot and Hocker (2007) stated that “in conflict we must learn to do what comes unnaturally” (p. 5). Conflict skills appear to be especially useful in negotiating issues with people who are different from one’s self, such as in the interaction that happens in intergroup dialogue. According to Wilmot and Hocker (2007), conflict resolution skills are not simply common sense. Rather, they are “complicated sequences of relational skills that most people don’t know” (p. 5). Therefore, it could be argued that training students in these skills might be necessary for successful intergroup dialogue.

Communication has been described as the central element in all interpersonal conflict (Wilmot & Hocker, 2007). Thus, communication behavior often creates conflict and also reflects it. More importantly, communication is the vehicle for productive or destructive management of conflict. Although there is a fairly wide range of communication skills that have implications for conflict management, research has given much attention and validation to personal conflict styles. The use of personal conflict styles allows the researcher to isolate five different approaches to managing conflict. These approaches, or “styles,” are separated on the basis of two behaviors: assertiveness and cooperativeness. Although each style can be beneficial, some styles can be more effective depending on the goals and context for the conflict. Therefore, in this research, conflict skills will be represented by the five conflict styles identified by Thomas and

Kilmann (1974): (1) competing, (2) accommodating, (3) avoiding, (4) collaborating, and (5) compromising. Determining the most appropriate conflict style(s) for intergroup dialogue is one step in furthering our understanding of effective communication in intergroup dialogue courses. Analysis of the skills of listening and self-disclosure are also needed to gain a more comprehensive picture of communication in intergroup dialogue.

### *Dialogic Listening*

Just as the creation of dialogue itself has no simple formula to cause it to occur, so it is also with the skill of dialogic listening. The approach to listening dialogically is different from the stance most people would normally take when they listen or share (Stewart & Logan, 1999). As previously mentioned, the emphasis in dialogue is that meaning or understanding is collaboratively co-constructed. This is different from empathic listening, in which the focus is solely on trying to understand and experience the meaning behind a person's verbal and nonverbal cues. Shields (1994, p. 386), in his "dialogical challenge to Verstehen," posited that understanding cannot be grasped as "emotional empathy, or as the placing of oneself in another's place (the loss of one's own place)." Based on Bakhtinian philosophy, Shields further concluded that the "empathic aspect" of Verstehen (or understanding) has the effect of silencing the other by masking differences. This can lead to a pattern of speaking for others, as if a person were the other. Synthesizing the ideas of others into our own without specifying difference can blur the lines between humans and their uniqueness. Dialogic listening should therefore allow for uniqueness, and some level of empathy, while creating a new co-construction

together. According to Stewart and Logan (1999) dialogic listening “requires a move beyond empathy to a focus on ‘ours’” (p. 218).

Bruce Hyde (as cited in Stewart & Logan, 1999) had an interesting insight into dialogic listening by looking at a key obstacle to this type of listening. Hyde described the main obstacle to dialogic listening as the kind of identity or self that replaces this openness to collaboration with the conviction that the ideas ‘I’ share are tightly connected with who ‘I’ am. Hyde further explained that if you are committed to the person, rather than being committed to being right, then there is room to engage productively with other points of view. This obstacle is similar to the self-oriented “conversational narcissism” previously described. Therefore, in order to listen dialogically one must have a high degree of openness, as well as a sense of sobriety, in considering the possibility that their views may be inaccurate, or could be balanced with the views of others. This openness and humility is directly tied to identity. The person caught up in being right has an identity first as an advocate for a certain position. The person who is committed has an identity first as a listener who collaborates with others to help create what comes out of the conversation. Thus, in order to listen dialogically, a person must be more interested in ‘creating-meaning-through’ than in being right. Hyde claimed that this is the single most difficult thing that can be asked of anyone in an interaction.

To participate in this collaborative process of ‘meaning making’ individuals need to develop a special kind of focusing and encouraging (Stewart & Logan, 1999). As previously alluded, the focus in dialogic listening needs to be on the new meaning of what is ‘ours,’ rather than what are ‘yours and mine.’ Focusing on ‘ours’ should prepare

someone to respond and inquire in ways that make it clear that getting to the meaning is a mutual process. Stewart and Logan (1999) likened dialogic listening to a potter's wheel. The person who is sharing is adding to what was previously put on the wheel by the other, meaning each move by the listener and the speaker is a cooperative effort to sculpt a new meaning together. Furthermore, it has been argued that listening with the drive to find common ground might actually open the possibility of creating new ground (Wood, 2004). Wood (2004) suggested one implication of this is dialogue does not necessarily prevent a person from standing his or her ground firmly, but it should require that in doing so the person remains open to the influence of the other. When one encourages in dialogic listening, they are not simply encouraging the other person(s) to say more, but rather encouraging them to respond to the responses that have already been put forth in a relevant way that keeps the co-construction process going (Stewart & Logan, 1999). Therefore, the unique brand of listening called "dialogic listening" is especially fitting for the context of intergroup dialogue classes. Students who develop skills of dialogic listening will likely be more effective in their overall communication across boundary lines. Improved listening should contribute to improved conflict skills as well as more effective self-disclosure.

### *Self-Disclosure*

According to Rosenfeld (2008), self-disclosure could be defined as "letting the other know the private and often secret parts of who we are" (p. 4). Self-disclosure is by nature a risky endeavor, yet the primary means by which humans come to know each other genuinely. Rosenfeld (2008) explained that self-disclosure requires courage to "be

known and to be perceived by others as one actually is” (p. 4). Not only does self-disclosure make the “self” known to others, but it also helps us understand our personal and interpersonal selves, which could also be risky for a person in a state of denial (Rosenfeld, 2008). The process of becoming self-aware, and the process of making oneself known to others are both important in the context of intergroup dialogue. As previously mentioned, a goal of the IGD program is that students will reflect on their own patterns of thought and behavior. This goal, in combination with holding one’s ground and making oneself known to others, makes self-disclosure a key communicative element in IGD.

According to Altman and Taylor’s (1973) theory of social penetration, self-disclosure occurs on two dimensions: breadth and depth. The breadth dimension refers to the number of different topic areas (breadth categories), and the number of items in each category (breadth frequency) that a person discloses about himself or herself. Breadth increases in proportion to number of topics that are disclosed. The depth dimension represents the layers of information ranging from superficial, or surface, to “core feelings about life, trust in others, and the nature of one’s self-image” (Altman & Taylor, 1973, p. 17). One finding of Altman and Taylor (1973) that appears to be divergent from the pattern of communication in intergroup dialogue is that social penetration processes are systematic in how they proceed from superficial to intimate levels of exchange. The unique context of intergroup dialogue, including the complex combination of people, topics, and situational factors, situates itself for a less systematic process of relational development. Relationships in the groups are expected to develop in an inconsistent way,

evolving with the influence of many factors that lead to a less orderly social penetration and depenetration. This claim will be developed further in the following section regarding the development of relationships.

### *Relational Development*

In reference to the ideas of Buber, Friedman (2002) stated that in dialogue “each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them” (p. 101). Relationship formation is conveyed here as a natural and possibly necessary part of communicating in dialogue. Reminiscent of the sentiments of Buber and Friedman, recent research on the subject of dialogue has maintained an emphasis on how relationships are developed through the process of dialogue. Zuniga et al. (2007) framed dialogue as a process that builds a relationship between participants that engages the heart as well as the intellect. Wayne (2008) also explained dialogue as an undertaking to build relationships. A key feature of relationship building in the IGD program is “the explicit recognition that relationships in the dialogue group are likely to be affected by the asymmetrical relationships and history of conflict or potential conflicts between the social identity groups involved” (Zuniga et al., 2007, p. 13). Therefore, building relationships with group members who are of a different social identity assumes a greater challenge than relationship formation with similar persons. There is an increased level of both conscious and unconscious barriers, such as prejudice and stereotypes that can interfere with relationship formation. Yet, if the intergroup dialogue class at CMU was successful in forging ally relationships, they should be

stronger in the end. By having worked through conflict, rather than not having it in the first place, relational bonds are expected to be stronger (Wilmot & Hocker, 2007).

However difficult it might be, forming relationships across differences is an important goal of the IGD program. Using the framework of relationships that coincides with the views of these scholars, the present research analyzed relationship development as an outcome of engaging in intergroup dialogue.

For the present study, it was expected that the emotionally elevated nature of intergroup dialogue would contribute to a greater rate of social penetration. Disclosure in an intergroup dialogue class is more risky and topics are embedded in a culturally and historically emotional context. Therefore, genuine disclosure might skip or move quickly through the outer layers of impersonal information and into the inner layers of personal information. As a result of speeding the process of social penetration, relationships in a group might develop deeper relational bonds than would be expected in a sixteen-week class. This also might have other implications for relational outcomes, such as greater trust and relationship outside of class and beyond the semester. However, when only applying the social penetration theory, there is an important level of relationship analysis missing for the context of dialogue. Leslie Baxter's (1998) Relational Dialectics Theory provides insight into the complex nature of relational development, where social penetration, and other more predictive theories are lacking.

Relational Dialectics is a non-traditional theory based on four key assumptions. The theory provides a useful framework for understanding the context of dialogue because it recognizes the presence of contradictory concepts within the same

circumstance. Four key concepts in the theory are contradiction, change, praxis, and totality. Contradiction refers to the “dynamic interplay between unified opposites” (Montgomery & Baxter, 1998, p. 4). It is the bringing together of opposites that creates a system of relating characterized by contingency, fluidity, and change. Change is a core concept that highlights the motion or process involved in relationships. Some authors have conceptualized dialectical change as having an orderly spiral movement, similar to the predictive aspects of social penetration. Others have accepted a more uncertain depiction of change, emphasizing epiphany, contingency, and chance. The focus of this research will be on the latter. The concept of praxis focuses on the “simultaneous subject-and-object nature of the human experience. Individuals act and are acted on” (Montgomery & Baxter, 1998, p. 9). Totality is a concept that means, “the inseparability of phenomena” (Montgomery & Baxter, 1998, p. 10). One main sense of totality is how the dialectical experience is contextually embedded. Therefore, contradiction cannot be separated from its temporal, spatial, and sociocultural settings. From this perspective, it is somewhat arbitrary to locate a clear boundary where the relationship ends and the context begins. The two are entangled within a complex web of experiences that tend to lead to relational growth.

Nagda (2006) described “friendship potential” as a necessary condition for intergroup dialogue to accomplish its purpose. Friendship potential “involves interactions that are sustained over time through repeated contact and are intimate enough to allow for self-disclosure” (Nagda, 2006, p. 554). Therefore, not only is friendship an outcome of intergroup dialogue, but according to Nagda the potential for it is also a

necessary precursor to the successful enactment of intergroup dialogue. Nagda (2006) further explained that the extent of intimacy of personal sharing in communication determines the depth of intergroup connection that can result. This concept is identical to the process of social penetration. There is a depth of relationship that is often the direct result of intimate or even risky disclosure. When this pattern of disclosure and relationship building is consistent or “sustained over time,” as in a sixteen-week intergroup dialogue course, there is great potential for depth of friendship and depth of genuine communication that will continue to compound in a reciprocal pattern. Based on this research, not only is there potential for relational bonds to be formed, but it was also expected as an outcome of the CMU COM 255 course.

Even though students were committed to sixteen weeks of engaging with each other, the course ended and the opportunities to relate with one another probably dwindled. Some students might have formed strong bonds that led them to continue meeting outside of the classroom, while others might not have continued any relationships. While continuing a relationship outside of the class might indicate the level of relationship that was formed, the current research did not focus on this. Instead, the focus of the current research was on how relationships developed during the sixteen-week period of the IGD course. The current study claimed that even confined within a sixteen week class, there is enough time to achieve the desired relational goals of IGD, such as increased understanding, relational development, and trust.

## *Trust*

Trust has been defined as “a belief by a person in the integrity of another individual” (Larzelere & Huston, 1980, p. 595). Larzelere and Huston (1980) identified two main attributions of interpersonal trust. The first is defining the other as benevolent, or motivated to act cooperatively rather than in an individualistic manner. The second attribution that is a prerequisite for perceived trustworthiness is honesty. Therefore, according to Larzelere and Huston (1980), if a person is perceived as benevolent and honest, that person is considered trustworthy. It is this trust that is the “integral feature” of all human relationships (Larzelere & Huston, 1980, p. 595).

In intergroup dialogue, the need for trust is implied by the presence of conflict and self-disclosure, which have both been identified in research as requiring a context of trust (Wheless & Grotz, 1977; Gottman, 1994). Gottman (1994) concluded that trust must be maintained in conflict, while Wheless and Grotz (1977) argued the same for trust in enacting self-disclosure. Zuniga et al. (2007) provided further support for this by specifically discussing the need for trust in the type of group processes involved in intergroup dialogue, which has been supported by previous research. It was explained that “trust grows and is tested as dialogue participants feel freer and more confident to raise difficult questions, challenge each other, express anger, offer support, and continue the conversation” (Zuniga et al., 2007, p. 14). Trust is necessary for healthy conflict and genuine self-disclosure to occur. When students feel safe to self-disclose, it is a result of trust. When students self-disclose without negative repercussions, but rather positive reinforcement, they develop more trust, which leads to more self-disclosure, etc.

However, when trust is not maintained, genuine disclosure also stops. Trust in this way is a necessary part of the processes of disclosure, conflict resolution and relational development.

### Summary

There is a need for genuine intergroup dialogue at CMU. Developing “dialogic” communication skills should create greater opportunity for genuine dialogue. Since there is a need for assessment data exploring the role of communication in dialogue, this research examined how engaging in dialogue impacts a person’s communication skills, and conversely whether the effectiveness of a person’s communication skills increased the likelihood of a genuine dialogue occurring. In order to measure the relational outcomes of dialogic interaction, this study analyzed how the level of relational development progressed or digressed in multiple intergroup dialogue groups. From this analysis a comparison will be made between “dialogic communication skills” and “dialogic outcomes.”

The following research questions were developed to shape and guide the current study:

RQ1: How do dialogic skills develop within intergroup dialogues?

RQ2: How do dialogic communication skills contribute to relational development?

RQ3: How do dialogic communication skills contribute to personal understanding of social justice issues?

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

This research examined participants involved in an intergroup dialogue course at Central Michigan University (COM 255b) to discover the role that communication plays in the dialogic process. The research utilized qualitative methods of gathering data. A qualitative approach provided the depth of information needed, given the nature of the topic. In this chapter, four areas will be discussed regarding the plan for research that was used: (1) in-depth interviews, (2) participants, (3) procedures, and (4) thematic analysis.

#### In-Depth Interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted in order to gather the substantive qualitative data needed. The interviews provided an opportunity for the students to explain their feelings and experiences of the class. In-depth interviews helped explain the emotion and motivations that are often missed with quantitative approaches (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Qualitative methods were especially valuable for gathering data that address the dialogic outcomes of trust and relational development. Specifically, interviews provided the stories that revealed what actually occurred in terms of trust and relational development. Furthermore, these same stories revealed trends regarding communication skills that were enacted.

Denzin and Lincoln (2008) discussed how the goal of an interview is to figure out what is in and on another person's mind, and to collect their stories. As Frey, Botan, Friedman and Kreps (1992) explained, the rapport that is built through an interview

makes participants more likely to disclose information not accessible with survey research that will cause the researcher to have a more thorough understanding of the participant's experience. Rubin and Rubin (2005) also explained that a range of personal interviewing styles is necessary to fit the variety of situations that qualitative interviewers face.

*The responsive interviewing model.* In this study, the approach to interviewing followed the model of responsive interviewing (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Responsive interviewing describes qualitative interviewing as a dynamic process, rather than simply a set of tools to be applied mechanically. Rubin and Rubin (2005, p. 15) explained that this model uses questioning styles that “reflect the personality of the researcher, adapt to varying relationships between researcher and conversational partner, and change as the purpose of the interview evolves.” Responsive interviews include the combination of main questions, follow-up questions, and probes. Rubin and Rubin (2005) explained that even though questions may be scrapped based on the responses of the interviewee, it is still wise to prepare an interview protocol or guide. The interview guide requires the main questions to be written out in full prior to the interview. Frey, Botan, Friedman and Kreps (1992, p. 318), described a moderately scheduled interview guide that will “adhere to a standard set of questions in a predetermined order but researchers also are allowed the freedom to probe for additional information in a more spontaneous manner than is allowed in a highly structured interview.”

For this study, the interviewer used the approach of the responsive interview model in combination with a moderately scheduled interview guide. Rubin and Rubin

(2005, p. 150) stated, “guides enable the researcher to balance the need for predictability with the freedom to explore unanticipated topics.” This balance of flexibility and structure was needed to gain natural responses as well as to pursue the topics pertinent to the current study.

### Participants

The participants were college students enrolled in a pilot Intergroup Dialogue course (COM 255b) at Central Michigan University. Advertisement and recruiting were used to gather interest in the class from a diverse population of people. There were fifteen students enrolled in the COM 255b course. The instructors split the students into two groups. Each group had two co-facilitators who led the group in dialogue about different topics such as racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, etc. The class was three-hours long with a fifteen-minute break in the middle. The class usually began with a lecture from a guest speaker. After the lecture, the students broke up into their respective dialogue groups.

A total of eight interviewees were drawn from each of the class’s two dialogue groups. Three of the participants had been trained as facilitators through the COM 555A course the previous semester. The researcher knew these three participants from taking COM 555A with them. The remaining five students did not know the researcher. They experienced the class with minimal previous exposure to dialogic communication. There were three participants that had a race and/or ethnic background other than ‘white American.’ Three participants were male, while five were female. The participants were all undergraduate students with ages ranging from 18-23 years old. For the most part, all

of the interviewees were eager to contribute to the study because they supported the class and valued their experience of it. Also, the interviewees all expressed some level of commitment to helping resolve social justice issues. Many desired to see the class become a required course for competency at CMU. Finally, each of the participants was given a pseudonym to ensure anonymity.

### Procedures

In this study, eight students were interviewed from the class of fifteen. This number of interviews represents over half of the population of the class, making it a fair representative sample. Rubin and Rubin (2005) explained that in conducting interviews it is better to work longer, with greater care, and with just a few people, than working more superficially with many of them. Thus, having eight interviews offered the ability to focus with great care on “just a few.” The interviews were scheduled during the Spring semester following the class. The interviews were voluntary. At any point before, during, or even after the interviews the participants were free to opt out. Two participants were drawn from one dialogue group and six were drawn from the other, for a total of eight interviews. Students were contacted through email from the class website. The interviews lasted 45 minutes to an hour in length. Participants were interviewed in a study room at the campus library. Each participant had a chance before the interview to ask any questions they might have had. Then, the interviewee read and signed the informed consent form to agree to participate.

The moderately scheduled interview guide contained questions on the following main topics: (1) dialogue, (2) communication, (3) communicative choices, (4)

relationships, and (5) social justice. Although the interviews were analyzed objectively through thematic analysis, the interview guide put forth in this research helped the interviewee to shed some light on the *reasons* for trust, relational development, communicative choices, growth as a communicator, etc.

Multiple recording devices were used to record each interview, reducing risk of technical failure. Promptly after finishing the interviews, the researcher copied the recordings into complete and precise transcripts. The researcher made note of the way in which things were said (with tears, excitedly, with anger, etc.). Also, stalling words such as “um” and “er” were noted. The goal in the precise transcription was to provide some of the emotion behind the comments of the interviewees. The researcher completed each transcription immediately following the interview. In this way the researcher gained further insight into the later interviews by becoming more familiar with the previous ones. While transcribing, thoughts related to the responses were written on a separate note pad as they occurred. These memos suggested reformations of research questions and dealt with the concepts, themes, and events the researcher could then ask more about (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Themes were established through extensive examination of the transcripts in order to discover the substantial topics common among the participants. During and after the transcription of each interview, notes were taken to identify common topics. Each transcript was analyzed individually to determine which concepts were of most importance for the interviewee. Then, all of the transcripts were examined together to find the common themes across all of the interviews.

## Thematic Analysis

The process of analyzing interview data occurs in several stages that often overlap (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). According to Rubin and Rubin analysis of interview data should begin early in the interview process. As each interview is completed, the researcher should examine its content to see what has been learned and what is left to discover. Then, based on this ongoing analysis, main questions and follow-up questions should be modified to “pursue emerging ideas” (Rubin & Rubin, p. 202). When the interviewing has been completed, Rubin and Rubin explain that all of the interviews should be examined to “pull out coherent and consistent descriptions, themes, and theories that speak to your research question” (p. 202). However, they urge that the goal of thematic analysis is not to merely count the occurrences of themes, but rather to “discover variation, portray shades of meaning, and examine complexity” (p. 202). Thus, the goals of thematic analysis are “to reflect the complexity of human interaction by portraying it in the words of the interviewees and through actual events and to make that complexity understandable to others” (Rubin & Rubin, p. 202). A guiding principle in analyzing interview data is to make use of systematic coding and extracting of information from the actual transcripts rather than looking for confirmation of the researcher’s initial ideas (Rubin & Rubin).

With all the interviews transcribed, the researcher then further examined the concepts, themes, and events that were developed throughout the interview process. These elements of an interview have been termed *data units*. The focus was to combine the material from all of the interviews into a coherent whole (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

According to Rubin and Rubin, this process includes five stages: (1) recognition, (2) clarification and synthesis, (3) coding, (4) sorting data, and (5) final synthesis.

The recognition stage involves finding the concepts, themes, events, and topical markers in your interviews. A *concept* is “a word that represents an idea important to your research question” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 207). *Themes* are statements that summarize and explain what is going on. *Events* are occurrences that have taken place. *Topical markers* are names of people, places, organizations, laws, etc., which “provide hooks that tie separate parts of a narrative together” (Rubin & Rubin, p. 207).

The next step is to systematically examine the interviews to “clarify what is meant by specific concepts and themes and synthesize different versions of events to put together your understanding of the overall narrative” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 207). As ideas are clarified and synthesized, new concepts and themes are generated by elaboration.

The third step is to code the refined concepts and themes. Coding involves creating a brief label designated to each concept, theme, event, and topical marker, then marking in the interview text where each is found. The point of coding is to make the pertinent units of data readily accessible across interviews. In coding concepts and themes Rubin and Rubin (2005) suggested that there is a need for a precise definition of the concept or theme so that they can be recognized in the interviews. They claim that the decisions that a researcher makes when coding data will largely shape what he or she will be able to conclude during the analysis.

The fourth step in analyzing interview data is to sort the data. Sorting is accomplished by gathering all of the data units with the same coded label into a single computer file (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Then, within this file the researcher can look at how the concept was seen overall, and look for subtle differences in the way that it was used. The researcher can also explore how events meant different things to the participants.

The last step is the final synthesis. The final synthesis involves bringing the concepts and themes together to show how they answer the research question(s) put forth, as well as any broader implications. This step provides reasoning for how different themes are connected and looks toward a potential theory.

### Summary

In order to gain a better understanding of the role of communication in intergroup dialogue programs, the pilot IGD course COM 255b at CMU was analyzed. Qualitative methods were used involving in-depth interviews that utilized the responsive interview model in combination with a moderately scheduled interview guide. The interviews provided a depth of qualitative data that was needed for studying the specific communication skills and outcomes in this research. Stories and details from the interviews illustrated the experiences of students and reasons for their communicative choices. Thematic analysis was used to make sense of the interview data. By creating coded themes based on the transcribed interview data, the researcher was able to draw conclusions about the research questions put forth in this study. Furthermore, broader

implications were applied to the communication field and the efforts of intergroup dialogue programs across America.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

The purpose of this study is to explore the role of communication in the COM 255A dialogue class at CMU. Specifically, this research has sought to discover how communication skills are developed and utilized for the purpose of creating understanding across social boundaries. The study also has attempted to understand the role of dialogic communication in social justice. Previous research has addressed multiple communication behaviors in dialogue: listening, self-disclosure, and conflict management, with minimal attention to understanding those skills from a communication perspective. First, a brief description of the participants will be given. Then, the five themes will be introduced and explained. Examples will be used from each transcript to support the themes.

#### Themes

A total of five main themes emerged: 1) learning through class structural elements, 2) becoming comfortable with discomfort, 3) growing through focusing on others, 4) risking openness, and 5) forming bonds. Sub-themes were created to focus on concepts that could not adequately be explained within the broader scope of the main theme. The themes will be used to help answer the research questions of this study.

It seems that although students came to the class uncertain about what it means to communicate dialogically, by the end of the class they each had a more thorough understanding of dialogic communication. Many interviewees attributed their learning to: class structural elements, embracing discomfort, practice, reciprocated

communication, and modeling others. One particular value in which many participants improved was focusing as much on others as on themselves. Multiple interviewees told stories of times when they realized they were focusing on themselves too much, and not truly considering the sharing of others. Further it appears in dialogue, openness was a risk that required action, not simply a passive state of being. There were multiple expressions of openness that each included a certain level of risk. With vulnerable sharing and listening, trust and empathy increased the likelihood of authentic bonds and ally building.

#### Theme One: Learning Through Class Structural Elements

All of the eight interviewees discussed the following elements as essential to shaping dialogic communication in the group: 1) Full value contract, and 2) Talking stick. Both of these structures represent an aspect of the class that, above any other element, participants claimed to have contributed to the development of dialogic communication skills. The structural elements served two main purposes.

The first purpose was to teach the group what it means to communicate dialogically. Students came into the class with an uncertainty as to what dialogic communication was and what behaviors constituted it. Participants would learn the specific behaviors that were expected in dialogue, as well as the values that were behind those actions through the class structural elements. For example, by creating the ground rules of the class as a group, members were forced to think more critically about why the rules were important. Ground rules were created during the second class period, at which point they had done some reading about dialogue. The ground rules, referred to as the

‘full value contract,’ contained within them the appropriate ways to communicate in dialogue. Therefore, by starting the class with a reflection on the rules, students were more apt to internalize the values behind them and commit to acting accordingly. The class structure of ground rules helped to teach students how to communicate dialogically.

The second purpose of the class structural elements was they forced individuals to act dialogically. The talking stick is a good example of this. As with the ground rules, group members agreed to rules that were connected to the talking stick. Some of these rules were actually implied – meaning the rule did not seem to be explicitly declared, but rather modeled and implicitly expected. These rules came about as the group practiced dialogue. One such rule was that participants should first respond with affirmation and feedback for the person who previously had the stick. The affirmation was meant to show appreciation for that person’s willingness to share, as well as respect for their unique perspective. Affirmation in this sense was not the same as agreement. Since there was a group expectation for affirmation, individuals felt pressured by their peers to act accordingly. It seems the full value contract and talking stick enforced dialogic communication more through the mode of ‘peer pressure’ than by any other means. However, there were also times of internal motivation where people began to desire using dialogic skills simply because they valued them. For these individuals, compliance was not just to avoid the punishment of peer disapproval, or possible relegation out of the ‘in-group.’ Based on the comments from interviewees, it could be concluded that the initial learning and development of skills came mostly from the full value contract and the talking stick.

As previously mentioned, the full value contract (FVC) was one group's name for the ground rules that they developed for participating in dialogue. Six of the eight interviewees commented on the FVC by name, while the remaining two did mention ground rules that would be found in such a contract, but made no reference to having a contract. Some of the rules included these: keep confidentiality, don't use cell phones, don't interrupt, don't get up in the middle of a sharing unless it's urgent, listen to understand, listen empathetically, push yourself to share, and be open to outcomes. According to Chris, "...all the dialogic skills were contained within the rules...or at least the vast majority. So when people observed those rules...[or] were practicing those skills, they were, um, I would say more effective." Chris expounded on the skills that he thought were learned through the FVC. He stated,

Someone would give an account of something, and then before someone responded they would paraphrase-plus, um, or ask a question about something that wasn't explained that they might have an issue with...[As a facilitator], I really wanted to stress like the 'listening to understand' part, because I think that was the most important thing. Um, probably to a lesser extent would be validating others.

Chris raised the value of listening to understand above validating others. Therefore, the ability to use paraphrase-plus and ask clarifying and probing questions were some of the most important skills according to Chris. Paraphrase-plus is a communication act that involves repeating what an individual says back to them to clarify the meaning, then

further providing a response to what was shared that requires the individual to go past their initial level of meaning.

The ground rules were important for creating a safe environment where people could trust one another. By committing to the rules as a group, participants could rest assured that others would not grossly break a rule. However, if someone did break a rule, there was further assurance that the group and facilitators would hold the person accountable. John observed that “adhering to [the] Full Value Contract creat[ed] a safe environment for the group.” He described how when the group agrees to the contract there is a resulting “group affirmation, that you don’t get in a typical classroom...a lot of us don’t even get it at home.” According to John, the FVC fostered a commitment to act kindly and be accepting of others in the group.

In general, the interviewees conveyed the idea that the most significant rules that helped form a safe environment were ‘maintaining confidentiality’ and ‘no judging.’ When students knew that their sharing was not going to be spread around, and they were not going to be judged for it, they were naturally more willing to be vulnerable in their disclosures. The result of a safe environment for the groups was that group members felt comfortable enough to fully engage in vulnerable sharing and listening.

John described the FVC as “the set of rules that we went into agreement on before we even started our full conversations.” John explained that when the group “wasn’t adhering to [the rules] it wasn’t a full group anymore.” Interestingly, John seemed to use the word ‘full’ to describe the degree of safety and comfort participants had to completely and honestly engage. When the group was not keeping the ground rules, the group was

not safe, and members were less comfortable engaging in a more vulnerable way. If even one person was not engaged, the group was missing a perspective and a listening ear. In this way, the group was not a 'full' group, but only partial without the full participation of its' members.

In a similar way, Carrie asserted that the ground rules of the FVC "helped in maintaining the atmosphere for effective dialogue." She claimed that the FVC was about "just trying to be respectful, so everyone can stay engaged in the dialogue." Carrie explained,

There were times where I like felt myself in my pocket get a text message, and I just really wanted to check it. And normally in any other class I would've just grabbed my phone out and looked. But, I felt like somehow obligated by that 'Full Value Contract' not to.

Carrie further explained that the reason she may have felt so committed to follow the FVC was,

The way that it was created – that if someone was using their phone, you know, other group members had the right to say, you know 'You have to put that away'. And no one had to say that. So, I think it probably worked. Like the contract was really nice.

Since the ground rules of the FVC were created together as a team, they also were enforced as a team. No one wanted to be the one to disappoint their peers and have someone 'call them out' on breaking a rule.

The FVC served a very important purpose for the group. The contract was a way to start the semester with a commitment to act respectfully toward each other. It set the level of expectation for how people would be expected to communicate. By having a list of expectations to start the class, group members were able to embrace a level of trust that is not normally present in a college classroom. The contract freed students to develop the communication skills needed for exploring real and sensitive topics and experiences. Possibly even more significant than gaining an ability to discuss difficult topics, individuals seemed to learn how to commit to accepting others no matter how much they disapprove of their beliefs or values.

Another tool, named the ‘talking stick,’ also enforced dialogic values and skills. Both groups used a talking stick to order the sharing in the group. The groups agreed upon rules for the talking stick. The stick designated who ‘had the floor’ to speak. According to Sally, “the general idea was that [the stick] would go around the circle.” Chris added, “The idea was that each person gets the stick once before someone gives it to them for the second time.” By making this rule the group was agreeing to allow others to share their perspective so as to include all members in the dialogue. The rule was “followed loosely,” according to Sally. However, the value of including others was raised, causing people to be aware of the importance of the perspectives of others. By forcing members to refrain from speaking, the talking stick became a reminder to each individual that the perspectives of others should be heard and valued.

John asserted that the stick made for “very, very fluid conversation.” Jenny also commented on how the stick helped the flow of conversation, stating,

At first it was very, um, you definitely had the people who wanted to talk more. And you could tell that they weren't actively listening to what other people were saying. And so it was really challenging because it would be kind of a roadblock every single time. But we started something where we would pass around the talking stick. So, that seemed to promote equal sharing a lot more.

Jenny attributed the development of skills for sharing the floor and active listening to the use of the talking stick.

Sally explained that even though they set up the stick to always go around the circle so that everyone was included in the dialogue, in actuality the use of the stick became "pretty free-flowing." Therefore, if someone wanted to talk out of turn, the others trusted that the person had a good reason to do that. Sally said this free-flowing attitude really "helped the overall atmosphere of [the group]." Giving other members the benefit of the doubt when they felt they needed to share out of turn allowed for a less rigid enforcement of rules, in exchange for a commitment to each other based on trust. Through committing to each other in this way members felt good that they could make the choice to respect others and contribute to the cohesiveness and equity of the group. According to Jamie, when a member of the group received the stick "[the sharing] was never just a random – somebody says something random and everybody's sitting there like 'alright, what's next,' you know, new topic." Jamie said the communication in her group was meaningful and purposeful through the use of the talking stick. Once the group adopted the stick, some students stopped 'hogging' the floor time and instead became aware of others who might want to share. Using the stick, each participant had a

chance to speak without being interrupted – or people “cutting each other off” as Jamie explained. If someone else wanted to speak, they would have to wait until the person sharing was finished: “Don’t interrupt...we never proposed questions while someone was still speaking,” said Jamie.

Participants also appeared compelled to listen in order to understand what the other person was saying. Chris explained that when a person received the stick it became a norm that “they would start by responding to what people are saying, and then...talk about what was on their mind. Then after that, everyone else had questions, and they would ask questions to the person that has the stick.” In this way, the stick fostered a focus on others through being prepared to respond to the person who had the stick before them. However, participants did mention gaining a genuine desire to seek understanding. Chris explained, “I used to just get irritated with people [who disagree with me], but I really am curious what makes people think what they think.” For Chris, listening for understanding went beyond ‘following the rules,’ to an internal desire of really gaining the perspective of others.

Therefore, much like the FVC, the talking stick seemed significant for enforcing good communication skills and dialogic values. The main skills and values that participants seemed to adopt included equal sharing and inclusion, patience to not interrupt, a focus on understanding others, and sharing something meaningful that relates to previous talk. As was the case for the FVC, the rules behind the talking stick held students accountable to carefully consider when they should speak and when they should

not speak. The stick was a reminder that everybody's perspective is valuable. The stick enforced this value by making sure each person was given the opportunity to share.

In summary, there is a convincing amount of support from interviews showing that participants felt class structural elements were the medium through which they most learned about the dialogic communication. The creation of the FVC and the talking stick instilled in students an understanding of what dialogic communication should be like. These two class components enforced the development of dialogic communication skills in multiple ways. Initially, participants were driven by peer pressure to follow the rules and communicate dialogically. As the class progressed, some interviewees internalized dialogic communication skills through their participation in the class. For example, many interviewees commented on how rewarding it was for them to 'become a learner,' and let others speak first. Even though the process of learning and applying dialogic skills did not appear to be perfect for everyone, participants expressed that class structural elements had a significant importance for developing the skills of dialogic communication.

#### Theme Two: Becoming Comfortable with Discomfort

Seven of the eight interviewees explained a struggle of trying to become comfortable in the midst of uncomfortable situations. In dialogue, there seemed to be a tension of balancing the desire to make sure people felt comfortable and safe, while also trying to challenge individuals to push past their comfort zones. Interviewees mentioned comfort possibly more than any other concept. They described how the FVC was a way to ensure a safe and comfortable environment, where individuals were able to be vulnerable with one another. Furthermore, students shared how certain topics made them

uncomfortable, causing them not to say much, while there were other topics they felt more than comfortable addressing. Some students explained how they were uncomfortable to start the class, and then became more comfortable as time went on. Other students described how they started out the class willing to take great risks in being vulnerable with people they did not yet know. However, these same students said that later in the semester their group lost a lot of vulnerability and willingness to press into discomfort due to reasons such as tiredness and difficult tension.

Interviewees explained how they would use icebreakers and open-ended questions to ease into difficult topics, so that people felt comfortable. They also mentioned how they were encouraged to push through tension and focus on the uncomfortable aspects of a particular dialogue. Sally stated, "...if people in the dialogue are experiencing tension...the only way for dialogue to continue to grow is to focus on that." There was a tension between creating a safe place where participants felt comfortable, and pushing individuals past their comfort zone.

Some of the main ways that interviewees discussed this tension between comfort and discomfort were in honest and personal self-disclosure (see theme four), embracing tension or conflict, and addressing difficult topics. These areas of discomfort are discussed in more detail in the paragraphs following. The sub-theme 'warming up' was also included in order to better understand the complexity of comfort and the ways the group tried to create it.

Embracing moments of tension was one way that participants discussed becoming comfortable with discomfort. Jenny suggested that there was a good type of tension and

a bad type. The good type was “productive,” leading to understanding. The bad type of tension was “unproductive,” and involved a “lack of understanding.” Sally provided characteristic behavior for both good and bad tension. Sally claimed bad tension is marked by “callous behavior,” such as: rolling eyes, rude faces, asking questions with mal-intent, and just not being nice. She asserted that for good tension, people would maybe disagree, “but at the same time wanting to understand.” She said it was like, “I don’t get you. How could you ever think that? But I want to know how you could ever think that.” According to Sally, good tension is marked by a desire to “work through the tension in like understanding why there’s tension...gaining understanding.” Therefore, good tension occurs when members are willing to work through the discomfort without just shutting down.

Jenny explained how her group handled tension, stating,

When there’s [good] tension, that’s when you’re at your learning edge, I guess as we called it in the class. Um, how our group handled it – I know that other people would shut down when there was tension...and that sometimes really disappointed me, because that’s when you get to the point where we’re like ‘whoa, we’re really on to something...It’s almost as if we reverted back to the old ways of communicating, where you just don’t see a point in going there. Maybe people thought that it wouldn’t be a productive conversation.

In this description, Jenny described how people responded differently to moments of conflict, or ‘tension’ in the group. She commented how there was a threshold of tension that many times would cause people to shut down and stop communicating. She

described this de-motivation as contrary to the motivated forms of dialogic communication. According to Jenny, there were also times where people pushed through the tension and remained at the ‘learning edge.’ This ‘edge’ is where people tended to reach the place of understanding. Jenny recalled a time in her group when they were discussing family structures. She stated, “some people brought some very interesting things to the table, in terms of having children, and just the socialization of children.” Jenny continued, “I remember hearing some things that I guess I had never really thought of, and at first I just thought ‘oh my gosh, okay come on.’ But, then as we went around, I began to see a perspective I had not been able to before.” Sally observed that in her group,

If people in the dialogue are experiencing tension, or something like that, like the only way for the dialogue to continue to grow is to focus on that [tension].

Because the dialogue is those people – so you have to like...you can’t just ignore that, or else you’re ignoring the dialogue.

By focusing on the reason for tension in the group, and addressing it, participants were better able to push through tension to understanding.

These examples provide evidence that becoming comfortable with tension is a necessary skill that allows for understanding to be reached. The ability to listen patiently and give others the benefit of the doubt, rather than choosing to shut down appeared to be essential for dialogue to occur. Remaining at the ‘learning edge’ of tension seemed to require great effort and risk for participants. However, if students were able to remain at this edge of tension, then they were more likely to reach a new level of understanding.

One of the most significant ways students developed the resolve to push through discomfort was by warming up.

### *Warming Up*

Seven of eight interviewees explained warming up as an essential part of becoming comfortable with discomfort. Many shared how they would start out their group time by sharing snacks together. Sally stated, “It took us a while every week to kind of get going.” Carrie explained how sharing food each week to start their time “helped I think set the mood.” She further stated that starting with food “gave us a chance to like talk as friends before we got into like this serious mode.” Ali recalled how they would do “...activities to get everybody warmed up...it was just something to get some trust going in the group. And then after the trust was going, we could ask questions and we (the facilitators) could just kind of lead it if it needed to be led.” Ali seemed to imply that the most important aspect of the icebreaker activities was to build up a level of trust or ‘comfort’ in the group. She also explained how the activities “were meant to kind of show prejudice...and get everything out there, so we’re being honest.” Therefore, not only do the activities help prime trust, but they also help to prime honesty. When a more serious opportunity to share deeply and honestly came, participants were more willing and comfortable doing so after warming up.

Eric shared that some topics were too emotionally provoking to just jump right into. He said some topics would conjure up emotions such as, “Oh my gosh...this is something I really care about.” For these topics Eric felt that warming up, or easing into them with easier questions really helped. He recalled,

We had like really easy questions and then it like lowered into the deeper ones.

And I feel like that's kind of something that opened up the group. Like it wasn't like 'okay, here's the issues we're facing right now, let's talk about the hardcore ones,' but like there were, you know, like baby steps I guess you could say.

Eric echoed the sentiments of the other interviewees, stating that warming up through 'baby steps' is helpful for the group to gain trust and become comfortable engaging in uncomfortable actions such as being honest and vulnerable.

Trust was closely linked to feeling comfortable for participants. According to the descriptions of interviewees, trust could be defined as, 'believing in others to act kindly toward myself and my personal information.' With trust, there was freedom to risk in self-disclosure, listening, and challenging the ideas of others. This freedom could be considered a 'comfort with discomfort,' as risk is an action that is considered uncomfortable by definition. With trust, stream of consciousness sharing was possible. John described stream of consciousness sharing as "unknown thoughts coming out, without filter or hesitation." Students felt more comfortable taking the risk to speak their minds when there was trust.

In summary, the accounts of interviewees revealed that in dialogue there is a need to become comfortable with uncomfortable situations. Interviewees discussed the concept of comfort more than any other concept. The two scenarios that were most uncomfortable in dialogue were the vulnerability of sharing and handling tension. Becoming comfortable with tension was a necessary skill in order for understanding to be reached. The dialogue groups were able to decrease the level of discomfort through

warming up. Groups warmed up with food, causal conversation, easy questions, etc. When there was initial comfort or trust, people were more willing to push their boundaries of discomfort. Generally, there seemed to be a tension among participants between creating a safe place where participants felt comfortable, and pushing individuals past their comfort zone. The ability to remain at the edge of tension was the way individuals most often reached new levels of understanding. Therefore, the ability to become comfortable with discomfort was crucial for achieving the goals of dialogue.

### Theme Three: Growing Through Focusing on Others

Six of the eight interviewees described how they developed their ability to focus on others at least as much as they focused on themselves. As mentioned in the literature review, Derber (1994) described a self-oriented character type that is highly egocentric and motivated primarily by self-interest. In conversation, the self-oriented person repeatedly seeks to turn attention to himself, which Derber termed “conversational narcissism.” A typical student began the dialogue group with a self-orientation. They had a desire to share their story so that their voice could be heard. However, after learning about dialogue and agreeing to communicate dialogically through the full value contract, students began to practice focusing more on what other people were sharing and less on what they wanted to share. This was partially a result of feeling bound by the rules, as well as from a genuine desire to contribute to the dialogue process. Cissna and Anderson (1994) used the term *ensembled individualism* to describe a more ‘mature’ form of individualism, whereby people are more capable of considering others through processes such as empathy and openness.

All of the participants agreed that one main purpose of the class was to seek and gain understanding from others. The importance of gaining understanding in the class was to contribute to a more just society through increased sympathy and decreased prejudice. With this guiding purpose, participation in the class seemed to change students' focus from getting others to understand them, to seeking new understanding from others. When students mentioned this shift they would frequently refer to it as a sign of growth. This shift in focus was central to becoming more 'dialogic' in communicating with others. A sub-theme was identified to provide insight for the ways *understanding requires desire and effort*.

Since the size of the group provided many opportunities to listen, participants began to develop an ability to focus on the sharing of others, using skills such as paraphrase-plus, clarifying and probing questions, eye contact, body posture, and respectful silence. Interviewees mentioned these skills more than any other skill set. While many still desired to share 'their' story, even the sharing of it became more about others. They were not as concerned with pushing their views and beliefs because they felt they were 'right,' but rather sharing one perspective among many that might contribute to the mutual working out of ideas. Therefore, even with sharing in dialogue, there was a general shift from self-focus to an other-focus.

According to the reflections from interviewees, the continuum of having a self-focus in seeking understanding to an others' focus was not a perfect science. It depended on many factors causing it to fluctuate. However, it did generally align with the

following progression: focus on own view, focus on moving to understand others, and focus on helping others to be understood.

Many interviewees described starting out the class with a focus on their own view. They wanted others to hear their voice. Some interviewees described participants as ‘stuck in their own perspective’ and ‘focused on arguing their own view.’ According to Ali, some individuals “just want[ed] to hold onto [their view] and just want[ed] to debate, you know, and argue their own opinion.” John described his struggle between focusing on himself and learning to listen, stating,

It can become frustrating when you want to reflect, or share, or build off somebody, but you can’t because it’s not your turn to speak...I recognized that I was not listening...I could tell it was bad listening because [laughing] people were sharing and I just was not even hearing them. What I was hearing was just me and my sad story, or whatever I wanted to share. That’s all I was hearing, I was just hearing myself.

John described this as a “learning experience,” saying “it became part of what helped me become a better listener.” For John, choosing to be reflective about his communication revealed how he was self-oriented, and that helped him to become more other-oriented.

Although some aspects of self-orientation were ‘selfish’ in nature, there were also positive and noble aspects to focusing on the self. Participants explained that through the honest sharing of experiences and beliefs, they found they could help others gain perspective. Chris explained, “[Sharing with the group is] good for everybody listening [in order] to...understand a new perspective.” Carrie commented in a similar way

stating, “[Sharing] is important for the group, so they know where I’m coming from – why my perspective might be shaped in a certain way.” Sharing to help others gain perspective is different than the ‘selfish’ way of sharing that is often prevalent in conversation. The ‘selfish’ communicator is not concerned for others’ well being, or in the case of dialogue – them reaching greater understanding. Furthermore, if there is a lack of willingness to understand someone else’s view, the focus on sharing your own view might be perceived as selfish, and possibly rightly so. Eric commented on how there was reciprocity in his group, saying it was like “...you can listen to my problems and I’m more than willing to listen to what you’re going through.” Eric was more willing to engage in listening when others listened to him. Participants would shut down when others were not willing to listen to their perspective. There was a sensitive balance in the dialogue groups between considering the ideas and experiences of others and contributing one’s own ideas and experiences. If this balance was off, students and their communication would often shut down.

Ali recalled a time when she shared something deeply meaningful with the class, and the group responded in a way that was not respectful. She stated,

...when a few people asked me questions it was more the less like, ‘Why did you think that was okay.’ It was kind of like mean questions I guess like trying to like corner me into saying it was wrong of me to do that...so, then I didn’t really appreciate that. And I actually became pretty angry with the girl.

Ali felt judged by the responses of her classmates. There was a lack of willingness to give her the benefit of the doubt about a very personal experience. Instead of seeking

further clarification from Ali, her classmates made assumptions about what she shared. There was a fine line in the class between making sure a person did not feel judged, and respectfully challenging their ideas. It appears that dialogue involves a balancing of both of these components. Much like the theme states, there was a tension between striving for comfort and challenging ideas. Challenging the sharing of others often required a discourse of ideas that would seem more salient with the communication found in debate. Yet, in dialogue the value of respecting others is raised much more than in debate. The goal of debate is to win, implying a conclusion (Rodriguez, 2008). In dialogue, the goal is to seek mutual understanding, implying an open-ended joint effort. Therefore, in dialogue ideas are challenged, but not to the extent of disrespecting the person and their life experience. The sensitivity towards respecting others is what seemed to set dialogic communication apart from debate for the groups.

Many interviewees reflected on how they grew throughout the semester in their ability to focus on understanding others. John said his role in the group changed from being the ‘ambitious sharer,’ to ‘becoming a learner.’ John observed “I really did become a learner...my role for myself became just to be...as conscious of others as I was myself. In both, because sometimes I’m not even...conscious of either.” John developed into a learner and began to strike a more ‘dialogic’ balance between sharing himself and learning from others. Chris explained how, throughout the semester, his group developed the dialogic skills to focus on others:

Toward the end there was more eye contact, more like active listening, and more asking questions trying to understand. The beginning was more like, I don’t

know, I guess talking at each other. There was I think less eye contact...But once we sort of got the hang of the way dialogue was supposed to work, um, they became better at communicating. I would say better because of the more understanding, than they were in the beginning.

Chris connected the groups' development of communication skills to an ability to focus on understanding others. Accordingly, all of the skills that Chris mentioned as a sign of improvement had to do with seeking understanding: more eye contact, more active listening, and more asking questions trying to understand. Therefore, Chris claimed that to be good at communicating dialogically, a person must develop the skills of seeking understanding.

Several interviewees discussed the act of helping others be understood as important in dialogue. One way people did this was through relating with their own personal experience. Sharing a similar experience helped group members to understand the person speaking by reinforcing what they were saying. However, there also appeared to be a need to balance finding similarities with valuing uniqueness. There were times it was appropriate to relate to the sharer with a similar experience. There were other times that offering up an experience thought to be similar was offensive. Carrie explained a point in one class period where, "we finally realized that there [are] people out there that are struggling like us, and have been through a lot of the same experiences." By relating with similar experience group members were able to see that they are not alone in their struggles. This was balanced by moments when the need to respect other's uniqueness was more important. By refraining from adding to what a person shared, students

communicated that they do not fully understand their experiences and beliefs. This was another way that students developed in changing their focus onto others.

Following a 'hard sharing,' there were many times that the group would simply go around and each affirm the person who shared. John described, "...as the stick was passed around, everyone would just give affirmation to this person. We wouldn't even share. It was good listening because we said 'what I heard you say was very difficult...I can't relate to it, but I just want to applaud you for sharing it.'" According to John, the fact that students affirmed the uniqueness of a person's experience without adding to it, or assuming complete understanding, was an indication of good listening. By focusing on one person's sharing, group members helped those sharing to be understood.

In one particular dialogue, Jenny was compelled to help others understand the perspective of a minority group that is not her own. She described the scenario stating, "We were talking about gay and lesbian issues...there were a lot of misconceptions around it and I found myself getting very, very frustrated. To the point where...being a future teacher, I mean you look at bullying in schools. It's got a huge homophobic and heterosexist undertone to it...and these things are very near and dear to me because a lot of people in my life who are gay have been among the most influential people, and to hear their stories and to know that I have the responsibility of being an ally for them...and then to have some of the things going around – I felt I had to share...That was the day I shared personally the most on my experience with those people who have impacted me so much."

Jenny was motivated to share out of feeling an obligation to be an ally for another group of people. Helping others be understood seemed to be a central way to become an ally for other groups. The desire to gain understanding of other members was essential for the development of individuals, relationships, and dialogue.

### *Understanding Requires Desire and Effort*

All eight of the interviewees discussed the importance of having a desire to engage in dialogue. Many felt that full engagement was necessary to effectively seek mutual understanding, and therefore fulfill a central purpose of dialogue. It became evident in the interviews that full engagement was often hindered due to a lack of personal desire to put forth the effort it takes. In contrast, when students had a desire to engage in dialogic behavior, the communication was more productive due to the increased effort put forth in applying the appropriate dialogic skills. Early on students became aware of the most effective skills of dialogic communication. However, actually practicing those skills required a desire to understand.

Self-focus and allowing oneself to disengage or ‘shut down,’ often interfered with cultivating a desire to engage. Eric explained how group members “caught themselves” when they were “shut off by what [a person] was saying.” According to Eric, members would realize they were shutting down and tell themselves, “I’m gonna still participate with the group.” Chris said he “definitely has gotten more patient talking with people who disagree with him.” He explained “I used to just get irritated with people, but I really am curious what makes people think what they think.” By these accounts, Eric and Chris show that the desire to engage in the dialogic process in order to gain

understanding can supersede the usual offenses that often shut down communication. As others described, learning to notice personal ‘triggers’ in order to not be provoked was key. The willingness and effort to restrain oneself from ‘knee-jerk’ reactions, and instead choose to give others the benefit of the doubt, comes from a greater desire and commitment to the dialogic process. Ali asserted that the hardest part about facilitating dialogue “is helping participants gain a desire and ability to focus on others.” As a facilitator, Ali suggested she could not force students to have a desire to focus on others. Having a desire to engage must be something that comes from within a person, not forced upon them.

The overall trend in the group seemed to parallel the findings in previous literature that when students communicate with one another in facilitated dialogue they increase their desire to communicate across boundary lines (Nagda, Gurin, Sorensen, & Zuniga, 2009; Wayne, 2008; Zuniga, Nagda, Chesler, & Cytron-Walker, 2007). As participants explored the dynamics and communicative options in the dialogue groups, they were often inspired to embrace the process and avail themselves of the necessary dialogic skills. Other factors also influenced their inspiration, such as the topic and the benefits. Eric disclosed, “...there were a few topics that, you know, I really cared for...like when we talked about those topics I cared, like I would put in the extra effort into listening to everyone that was talking about that topic.” According to Eric, topics would spark the interest of some people more than others. It was in the topics that Eric cared about that he was extra willing to put forth the effort into communicating. However, the motivation from a topic varied from causing students to dialogically seek

understanding, to them only focusing on their own perspective. The topic alone did not enforce dialogic communication. Therefore, only occasionally did some interviewees experience the benefits to listening and seeking new levels of understanding with others.

Chris observed in his group,

When people realized that when they listened it's like a really good feeling; When they actually finally realize what someone else's experiences are, they want more of it. So, throughout the semester there was more and more question asking and really like genuine curiosity.

Dialogue is a process that requires effort to communicate across differences in order to gain understanding. Without the desire to put forth effort and risk, the communication process would dead end. As in the case of bad tension in the group, students became less motivated to communicate dialogically, and more likely to shut down or engage in other forms of destructive conflict. In the event of "The Switch" discussed in theme five, students' most common reaction to bad tension was to shut down and have internal anger that harmed relational connection and the willingness to apply dialogic communication skills.

In summary, interviewees all agreed that growth occurs when focusing on others becomes the priority. It appears that when individuals became less self-oriented, and more focused on learning from others, they were more effective at communicating in a respectful 'dialogic' manner. This often led to exchanges marked by trust and increased understanding. However, when individuals were focused more on themselves, group members tended to shut down and give up on pursuing a mutually gained understanding.

In some cases, ‘getting others to understand you’ was very noble and other focused – as when a student was helping others see a new perspective that they were seeking. Although seeking to understand others may seem to be a noble cause, the motives for doing so were sometimes selfish – as when a person was just trying to use someone’s sharing only to build up their own argument. Therefore, the process of seeking mutual understanding in dialogue proved to be complex. A particular action could take on several different meanings given the specific context of topic, emotion, vulnerability, state of each individual, and the overall trend of an individual’s actions. Finally, understanding requires desire and effort. When students were able to become internally motivated to engage in dialogue there was a lot more growth and much fewer setbacks – such as being provoked or shutting down. Seeing the benefits of focusing on others made participants desire to engage more.

#### Theme Four: Risking Openness

The concept of openness was expressed in multiple forms within the dialogue groups. One thing that each form of openness had in common was that it was an active risk, not just a passive state of being. Participants discussed the term *openness* in two main ways: 1) the willingness to learn from others, and 2) the willingness to share honest personal information. For both of these forms, being open required a certain level of risk. This level of risk in openness could not happen without active effort. Whether a person desired to be open-minded or vulnerable with sharing self, the willingness to apply effort was necessary. Openness often came easier at certain times and with certain people due to the specific context of the group: the topic, their behavior choices, trust, etc. However,

overall, there was usually a degree of risk and effort that was required to express and experience openness.

Both forms of openness were important for dialogic communication to occur. If students chose not to be open-minded, then the idea of sharing meaningful information became pointless. If students were unwilling to offer themselves vulnerably, then there was not much to gain from listening. The class would be more comparable to a lecture or discussion. Openness was key to achieving the goals of the class. The central objectives of the COM 255 course were to “Prepare students to competently engage and interact with people who are different than they are,” “Develop a better understanding of how social and cultural factors create differences in our society that impact us and our personal interactions with others,” “Develop a better understanding of the different forms of discrimination and how they intersect,” and “...demonstrate an understanding of social justice.” Interviewees all agreed at some level that these objectives were reached through openness in the class.

Describing dialogue, Carrie stated, “I know like the most important thing is like you have to have two parties that are willing to learn and share.” Unless individuals were open to the ideas of others, group members were not willing to share anything meaningful. Without the presence of open-mindedness participants would simply shut down. The ideas of others must be accepted as valuable for them to feel comfortable sharing them. This required being in a state of mind where participants were willing to be vulnerable with their own views and potentially change them. Sally recalled a time when she realized she was starting to really ‘hear’ the message a group member was

sharing. She stated, “Wow, this is one of the first times I’ve actually been able to listen and hear this message. Because they’re people you care about then.” In this example, the thing that motivated Sally to actually listen was caring for people as more than just acquaintances or classmates. Through developing close bonds with one another, group members began to trust and reach enough of a level of comfort to become vulnerable.

Eric explained a time in his group when there was a gathering of multiple views, or what could be called a ‘gallery of perspectives.’ The group was discussing the topic of marriage, and specifically at what moment a person is married. The group could not agree if marriage began at communion, the pronouncing of man and wife, or the consummation. Eric said, “We had like different [ideas], but then like, you know, we couldn’t say, like we couldn’t agree upon ‘oh you guys are married at this point.’” In this example, Eric described how the group put forth multiple ideas and then openly considered all of them. Ali took this ‘gallery of ideas’ a step further stating, “It was trying to get all the opinions out about the topic – all the sides. But, also like sparking something in the students involved to ask questions and want to know and not just have the information put out there and nothing done with it.” With this example, Ali communicated that simply gathering ideas is not enough. Students needed to develop a desire to pursue understanding of why people believe what they do. This is an example of how openness was active and risky in the dialogue groups. It was risky because it involved pushing people for more information, which could result in a poor response. It went beyond paying attention to what others were saying and supporting them. This type of open-mindedness was transformational, leading students to genuinely engage with the

ideas and experiences of others in order to rethink their own ideas and possibly adjust them.

Jenny recalled a time in her group when,

Everyone started having this delay in their speech, because people had put so many ideas out on the table, and there was that tension that finally, um, you could tell people were thinking in a different way...I found myself pausing to collect my thoughts because ‘oh, I hadn’t thought about that before, and since you just brought that to the table and...put that against what I thought I believed.’

In this description, Jenny shared how even though many ideas were ‘brought to the table,’ the group was really thinking through each one in relation to their own paradigm. This type of reflection and processing seems to be at the heart of seeking understanding. Chris highlighted the value of using questions to gain an inside view of what is being shared stating, “...it’s important to listen because you hear what the person sharing thinks is important. From an outsider, it may seem obvious, but you need to understand from an inside view.” The skill of gaining an inside view into what others think, while refraining from assigning one’s own meaning to a sharing is key to listening with openness. The risk of making oneself vulnerable to the ideas of others was valuable and necessary for the type of relating dialogue requires. Beyond the willingness to truly consider the perspectives of others, the openness of sharing honestly and vulnerably further contributed to the dialogic relating that the groups sought.

Even with a safe environment, students generally had to struggle with the risk of sharing honest and personal information. One risk in sharing was the possibility of being

judged or misunderstood. This risk might be especially salient for individuals in the group that had experienced discrimination as a result of some part of their social identity. In deciding whether or not to fully disclose something, participants had to balance whether the risk of being judged by their peers was worth the potential rewards of being accepted and of contributing to the dialogue. Sally talked about a time when she really struggled with sharing something that was very personal. She recalled,

I didn't want to share because like I was the facilitator...And it's not like 'oh, I don't want them to know about me.' It's like these people are gonna think, 'Who is she to talk to me about social justice when she let all of this stuff happen to [her] for so many years.' At least that's what I felt. But, I was like 'I can't...' like with those feelings, again, dialogue won't happen. So, um, I had to just hush those thoughts, and I just shared.

Sally pushed through the uncertainty of whether or not group members would judge her for her sharing. Even though she had some comfort in knowing that the group had committed to not judging, there was risk involved because she could not know for sure if students would stick to those rules. She chose to take a risk and share so that dialogue could happen. Interestingly, instead of losing the respect of her group members, the group "gained respect that [she] was so willing to share."

Another risk with sharing was that someone in the group might not keep confidentiality. In this way, sharing could lead to a secret being spread, rumors, or in the realm of social justice, a risk of becoming a victim of hate crime. Once again, there was some comfort in knowing that the group had agreed to the ground rules, which includes

confidentiality. However, even with the full value contract there appeared to be a certain level of risk felt by the participants. Ali described one particular class period where two group members discovered a secret about another group member. Ali was afraid that they were going to call him out and make him share the secret with the group. She said, “We were very concerned that they were going to out him during our [dialogue].” Ali further stated, “...it could be like personally damaging to him physically outside of the group.” Ali was concerned that the participant would not have the rightful choice to decide whether or not he would share his secret. Due to the nature of the secret, if confidentiality was not kept he could have been a victim of hate crime.

With each of these risks, students were faced with a decision to either take the risk of sharing, or remain where it is safe. As Sally described, “It takes a lot to be face-to-face with someone and be so open with them, and true to yourself to allow dialogue to occur.” According to interviewees, one powerful aspect of dialogue is that, at times, people became willing to take those risks. This often led to deepened trust and bonds with those in the group. It also led to happiness and relief for the person sharing. Much like social exchange theory predicts, students faced the decision to share in economical terms. If the benefits of sharing outweighed the costs, a participant might be more likely to share. However, no matter how rewarding it may have been, there was always a certain level of risk in honest and personal sharing.

### *Silence is an Act of Openness*

Silence is a communication skill that made a large impact in the dialogue groups. As participants practiced listening with openness the value and skill of silence became

salient. Many students discussed moments where a group member shared and the only proper response was to be silent. They found that in these moments they were able to actively respect the sharing of another and truly be open to it. Although it seems contradictory for silence to be considered active, the choice to be silent often required action to restrain oneself from adding to what a person shared. Jamie described an experience in her group where “one of the participants was telling her story and she ended up like basically telling us like a deep dark secret type of thing.” She continued, “Our group wasn’t really ready for it...But, after that it was like ‘Well, I mean anything I have to say doesn’t, you know, compare to that’...I mean you could offer like sympathy, empathy, but it was...right there our silence kind of said a lot.” Silence in this instance is portrayed as a way to respect someone and care for them by restraining from adding comments and letting the sharing of the person be respected for what it was.

Jenny recalled a time she referred to as her ‘first time listening’:

...At that moment, um, I really knew that I knew nothing. So, in no way did I know anything about that experience that they were sharing. You know, I don’t know what it’s like to be black. I don’t know what that feels like being a minority. And so, in that moment I was just kind of an empty vessel to be there, you know, and to learn. And so I wasn’t talking...I didn’t have any legs to stand on, so to speak, in terms of my own experiences. I was just there to listen. I couldn’t even relate to it.

Jenny recognized that in this instance, she became aware of her lack of understanding. She realized that the only appropriate response was to not share anything. She felt that

adding her own experience would not be relevant to what was shared, and maybe would even cheapen it. In this example, it appears that the ability to learn must be preceded by a humble awareness of a need for gaining perspective. Jenny stated, “that’s a really scary, but wonderful place to be in – to know you know nothing – cause it opens you up. It humbles you to a point where you’re able to listen in other areas. So it was critical.” Finding this awareness appeared to happen in the reflective places of silence.

Gaining perspective is something that happens when people are able to remain quiet and really receive what others are sharing as something of value that will add to their understanding. Sally provided another example of silence as a sign of learning. She recalled a time when she shared ‘deeply’ about her “experience with having a younger sister who’s developmentally disabled.” Sally observed, “there was silence afterwards.” She continued, “reflective silence – I think that’s another thing that’s important – or a good sign I think.” Many interviewees described this type of ‘reflective’ or ‘learning’ silence as ‘a-ha’ moments. It seemed it was often in these moments that participants gained perspective, gained understanding, or changed their mind or beliefs about something.

In summary, openness was expressed in the dialogue groups in multiple ways. The main forms of openness included open-mindedness, vulnerable sharing, and being accepting of others. Openness is making an active effort to engage in each of these forms, because they cannot happen without active effort. The willingness to learn often involved choosing to truly listen to and process what others shared. The willingness to share real and honest personal information involved a choice to take a risk and be

vulnerable. Last, being willing to accept others often required suspending judgment of them and their views. By giving others the benefit of the doubt participants were actively expressing openness. Openness, as interviewees described it, was not simply a passive state. It was rather an attitude that was demonstrated by actions. One action that is often considered a passive state is the act of silence. It seemed that when students learned to use silence actively as a tool and a skill, the result was often gaining perspective and a feeling of respect for the person sharing. By choosing an open mind, participants were able to show respect and often gain understanding. As theme two described, there was a tension between ensuring the comfort of others through acceptance, and challenging their ideas with respect.

#### Theme Five: Forming Bonds

The relationship focus of the dialogue groups was another aspect of dialogue that separated the communication in dialogue from that in debate. Based on the stories of interviewees, relational bonds formed very quickly. The level and rate at which relationships developed in COM 255 appeared to be far above the average diversity course. Jamie described, “It’s not like a ‘classmateship’...being all ‘oh, so and so’s in my class’ – but knowing that person...being able to say, ‘I had class with that person, and that person said this and this, and totally made me think differently.’” The class format and dynamics would seem to suggest that relationship formation might be slow. They had a limited amount of time together – only meeting once a week for a semester. In addition to time constraints, the diversity of the group added more discomfort and uncertainty to an already intimidating experience. Also, multiple students mentioned the

potential discomfort of feeling an obligation to be vulnerable with a group of diverse people that they did not choose to have in their group. They were rubbing shoulders with people they might not ever interact with in their lives otherwise. All of these factors would seem to hamper the formation of deep relationships in their groups. However, there was conclusive evidence that group members developed deeper than normal bonds with one another, and quickly.

Interviewees cited several signs of friendship occurring, including exchanging phone numbers, becoming friends out of class, becoming facebook friends, and hugging or physical contact. Some of them were still hanging out together several months after the class had ended. Interviewees mentioned trust more than any other thing as the baseline necessity for relational development. Interestingly, Martin Buber described getting to truly know others through dialogue as often the result of a ‘shattering of security.’ He states, “The moments of the *Thou* are strange lyric and dramatic episodes, seductive and magical, but tearing us away to dangerous extremes, loosening the well-tried context, leaving more questions than satisfaction behind them, shattering security” (as cited in Friedman, 2002, p. 68). As mentioned in theme two, it seems the students felt a tension between having a comfortable trust, and abandoning comfort by pushing themselves into vulnerable places in conversation. A good balance of both factors seemed to contribute to the development of friendship in the group, while too much of one of them negated any growth. Too much comfortable trust caused the group to stagnate and not grow, while an over-abandoning of comfort caused individuals to become timid due to a perceived lack of care, or arrogance.

Interviewees discussed a number of reasons for the development of relationships. Several attributed the novelty of shared experience as a reason. Chris observed, “I think experiencing dialogue and that understanding is just something that we all share, which is how our relationships became so strong.” Some participants explained how the display of emotions seemed to contribute to the formation of deep bonds. Finally, the following sub-theme will describe in detail the most common reason for relationship development that participants described: the group functioned like a support group.

### *Support Group Function*

Multiple participants described their experience in the group as much like a support group. These same participants connected the presence of trust and care to the development of relationships. There was a pattern in the communication of the group that led to the feeling of a support group. The pattern often included the following progression: a foundation of trust, honest sharing, understanding and acceptance, reciprocation, and friendship.

Sally contrasted the ‘shallowness’ of the outside world with the meaningful communication in class. She stated, “I think that’s what’s so crazy about dialogue...I mean I don’t know about other people, but I don’t really have any other place I can go to talk about issues so deeply and so openly with a group of people. Especially a group of people I just met.” Eric told of when he shared in his group about a personal issue. He said, “I told them ‘My parents are going through a rough time right now,’ and they were like all supportive. They were like ‘Oh, you know, it’s something that everyone can go through.’” Eric then likened the experience to group members acting the role of a

counselor for one another, saying, "...a psychiatrist like is what was in the back of my head. Like you can listen to my problems, and I'm more than willing to listen to what you're going through." Eric shared how he saw his group as a form of a support group. By giving the analogy of a psychiatrist, Eric communicated that an important function of the group is to 'be there' for each other as a listening ear. In dialogue however, unlike the psychiatrist relationship, both members in a reciprocal fashion share the role of being a listening ear. When participants focus on understanding one group member, that individual is likely to feel validated and have more trust with those individuals. Further, he or she will feel compelled to reciprocate the kindness. In this way, feeling heard fosters love and commitment to others and the dialogue process.

Interviewees explained how finding similarities helped group members to feel close to each other – that they were not as different as they initially had assumed. Jenny said how her group coined the 'yeah, yeah' phrase, or 'yeah, yeah, I understand you.' She stated,

...in those moments, that's where...when you thought you were different from someone and then you say 'yeah, yeah, but we had that experience...yeah, yeah, I understand what you are saying.' Then that's where bonds happen. And that's where bonds happen outside of dialogue, you know, when you find your similarities with people.

Jenny attributed part of the development of relationships in her group to finding similarities with one another. She continued, "And I have to say, the people who are in my dialogue group, I've gained a lot of good friends from. A lot of them people who I

probably wouldn't have been friends with outside [of class]." Jenny assumed that because she seemed so different than many of her classmates, she probably would have not crossed paths with them if it were not for the class. The development of these relationships served the purpose of forming ally connections of support and affirmation across social gaps.

Interestingly, the class was not meant to function as a 'support group.' Rather, the class goals were more to challenge individuals to gain understanding from the experiences of others. Students needed affirmation to feel comfortable, but they also needed to push through discomfort and be challenged in their thinking. It could be that the focus on supporting group members caused the group to be hesitant to really challenge each other's views. Carrie described an instance when another member was acting in a way that was unproductive for the group. She stated,

...everyone knew this person was kind of [upset], and they were taking it out on the group. And everyone was just kind of like trying to move on and ignore it and keep the dialogue rolling. Normally I'm a very confrontational person, but for the purpose of dialogue it was like, no one really wanted to be like, 'that's not cool of you.'

In this instance, Carrie suggested that students were constrained by their perception of the 'purpose of dialogue.' The purpose of dialogue that the students seemed to be assuming was that the most important thing is accepting, affirming and not judging what individuals share. These would all be important qualities for a support group. Therefore, it may be that members did not challenge the person because they felt it would be judging

or rejecting them, which is contrary to what they were trying to create. This sheds light on an important tension in these dialogue groups: affirmation and acceptance, versus challenging perceptions and beliefs. This tension is actually another niche for the dialectical tension of embracing comfort versus embracing discomfort. The goal of closeness for the group would appear to reinforce only the first half of the tension.

Eric observed that even in the midst of differing opinions, his group had an implicit agreement to still care for each other. He explained,

...like if someone had a different view, you know, there was that, I wanna say ‘groupness.’ You know, like where you can understand what they’re saying, like you know, ‘you agree with me, you don’t agree with me, but I’m still gonna be like your friends, you know.’

This example provides insight into how, in some cases, the commitment to friendship allowed students to feel they could disagree and still maintain closeness. This reveals the importance of finding a balance between affirmation and challenging other members. Interestingly, this balance seemed to be found more readily in the group that was less focused on closeness, or ‘cohesiveness.’

### *The Switch*

One clear example of a time that revealed the closeness and commitment of the group was an event referred to as ‘the switch.’ The switch was an event that every interviewee referred to. Jenny explained the event from the student perspective:

The first time we got in there we were assigned our group members. And then our group for some reason just really clicked. Um, that first night everyone just

really felt comfortable. Um, everyone just kind of took a leap of faith and it worked out. We were very trusting of that group. And then the next week...they switched people, and the people that were switched were really frustrated, and then didn't have an understanding of really why...And then of course within our group there was a lack of trust...No one understood why it happened. And then also, it's hard to trust when the group dynamic switches.

As a facilitator, Sally also explained 'the switch.' She stated,

It's crazy how after one session that [time] of just sharing and getting to know one another...And we didn't even talk about any heart-wrenching topics...After one week...so many people in the class were like just so hurt about the fact that, you know, we switched members...I mean at first I'm like, 'these people are nuts, like these people have serious attachment issues.' But, it's not that, I mean they're not nuts. It's just they really came into a new experience. Dialogue is just so much [a] different experience than they have ever known.

In further explanation for why 'the switch' was so devastating to the group, Sally described how she and her co-facilitator "created – I think, I hope – a very like trusting, open environment right from the get-go...So, I think they felt kind of like that trust was betrayed."

Through these accounts, and others, it appears that one group in particular became very close and trusting of each other after only one class period together. According to Sally, the novelty of the experience created a deep commitment between members right from the start. From Jenny's account of the event, it was as if each participant took a leap

of faith in committing to be vulnerable with the group, and they found after the first session that the risk was worth it – they could trust one another. By then changing the group and its dynamics, its members became disoriented and lost some trust. The severe reaction of this group to switching a member seems to point to the amount of trust, hope, and value that they placed in their group. Many individuals in this group seemed to desire forming ‘ally’ relationships with other members. This switch may have very well felt like a threat to them forming those relationships and having the opportunity to go as deep with the group as they were hoping to.

One reason for the group having such a hard time reforming was the bitterness, and resulting shut-down of the individuals involved in the switch. The two students that were involved in the switch not only shut down, but they also distracted their groups from reorganizing around the goals of dialogue. They would bring up their grievances every class period, frequently interrupting and take large portions of class time to air grievances. This seemed to completely stall any momentum towards dialogic behavior. Referring to one of them, Ali recalled, “...when she switched groups, she just had a negative attitude and actually kind of stopped our dialogues. Everything she said wasn’t really topically related, it was more like just kind of what she felt like talking about.”

John described,

...we didn’t like the switch because we felt like the person was bringing in all of this baggage and that it really took away from our dialogue. And so the tension became a huge learning experience for us because we were working with a person

who we didn't feel was invested in the process or in everyone else in the group. It seemed like they were really invested in themselves and their sad story.

Self-focus and a lack of willingness to participate in the process of dialogue, were evidence that the students had shut down in response to the switch. Their responses kept the group (themselves included) from re-establishing a 'comfortable trust.' However, John took the tension from the individual as a 'huge learning experience.' He explained how the ways that he felt he learned from this person possibly more than if she had not been switched. He stated, "I might have felt dis-ease about this person's anger, but I saw so much more of them that I wouldn't have had the switch not been made, um and had we not dialogued." John seemed to highlight an unique perspective, that no matter what happens in the group, it can work for the good of the group as long as people can take steps to be dialogic while addressing issues.

In the accounts of both students, interviewees shared how the willingness to participate in dialogic behavior was the act that 'bridged the gap,' for the two involved in the switch. John stated, "Dialogue really bridged the gap. I learned so much from this person...they became a friend." He further recalled, "we saw little steps and rare moments of honest, genuine sharing – where it was like 'Wow, this is so great! Everyone is in this together.'" Ali explained the way that the switched student in her group changed stating, "...by the end she was sharing, even though it usually wasn't on topic, at least she was involved I guess." Although the switch was very traumatic for some individuals, those students were able to eventually take some small steps to re-engage the group. Even though the students were still somewhat self-focused, dialogic behavior did

allow opportunities for openness and vulnerable sharing that drew them back into a connection with the group.

Another reason the group had difficulty reforming was that several individuals felt they had lost trust in the process and goal of dialogue. Jamie referred to people in her group who had the following response: “Well, you know something, I guess this dialogue wasn’t what I thought it was gonna be, you know, like after they made the swap, because it was based on ethnicity supposedly.” It appears several people initially felt betrayed by the instructors, because they perceived the action to be exactly opposed to the goals of the class, namely social justice and ally building. Sally explained, “It was almost like a facilitator versus student thing going on, which was detrimental to dialogue...we all have to be on the same level.” Some of the students appeared to take the event of the switch as an intentional attack on them. Some even considered it to possibly be a form of discrimination. This perceived offense seemed to create division between the facilitators and students. Jenny observed that after ‘the switch,’

...for quite some time there was kind of a hierarchy in terms of facilitator/student.

And so when that was present I didn’t feel comfortable sharing. I heard it from the other people that they didn’t feel comfortable sharing because there was a kind of – just that tension.

Students felt a heightened level of discomfort with the presence of the student/facilitator tension that resulted from the switch. Jenny commented that the thing that finally began to resolve the facilitator/student tension was them showing vulnerability in their sharing. She stated, “...as soon as they started sharing some of their opinions, we were able to see

them as part of the group, which also allowed us to grow as a group.” By assimilating the facilitators into the group through their sharing, the group became free of much of the division and tension that kept members from feeling free to share.

In summary, despite the many factors that were working against the possibility of forming deep relationships in the COM 255 dialogue groups, there was evidence that group members developed deeper than normal bonds with one another. One group did so particularly fast. Both a ‘comfortable trust,’ and an ‘abandoning of comfort’ were important for the development of friendship in the group. The reason for relational development that was most commonly referred to indirectly by interviewees was that the group functioned like a support group. Interviewee’s described supportive actions as key to the group’s vitality. Feeling heard fostered commitment to other members, and many times to the dialogue process itself. Developing relationships was very important to many for gaining allies. Yet, the communication within those relationships was most effective when students balanced giving affirmation with challenging each other to think and jointly address difficult issues.

The severe reaction of one group to the switching of a member seemed to reveal the amount of trust, hope, and value that they placed in their group. The switch may have felt like a threat to many students who desired to form ally relationships with other members above all other goals. The willingness to participate in dialogic behavior was the act that ‘bridged the gap,’ for the two involved in the switch. Finally, by re-assimilating the facilitators into the group through their vulnerable sharing, the group was able to move past the division and tension that kept members from feeling free to share.

The principles and skills of dialogue seemed to offer a rekindling of trust and vulnerability in the groups. With trust and vulnerability came the freedom and desire for relational development.

### Summary

Although there were many aspects of the dialogue process addressed in the interviews, five themes emerged as most significant. The values and skills of communicating dialogically were initially learned through the class structural elements of the full value contract and the talking stick. There was a dialectical tension in the groups between being comfortable and engaging discomfort. The students perceived growth in dialogue to occur when they were able to become comfortable with uncomfortable situations and actions. Another way that students perceived growth was when they were able to change their focus from getting others to understand them, to understanding others. When students changed their focus in this way they felt they were being more dialogic. To truly seek understanding requires desire and effort. While openness can often be considered a passive state of being, the participants described it as an act of embracing risk. Finally, students managed to form bonds very quickly despite the constraints of time, differences, and inability to choose participants. Supportive action, trust, and vulnerability played the most important roles in the formation of relationships. The possibility of forming ally relationships was a key motivation for many participants.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

This study analyzed how skills developed, and in what ways those skills contributed to the goals of the class. Three research questions guided this study: 1) How do dialogic communication skills develop within intergroup dialogues? 2) How do dialogic communication skills contribute to relational development? 3) How do dialogic communication skills contribute to personal understanding of social justice issues? This chapter attempts to answer these research questions through a discussion of the implications of five themes described in chapter three. The findings of the current study are compared to previous literature. Finally, the limitations of the study will be discussed, as well as implications for future research.

Research Question One:  
How do dialogic communication skills  
develop within intergroup dialogues?

The skills of dialogic communication have rarely been modeled for students. For individuals in COM 255b, the skills of dialogue were in many ways contrary to the approaches they were accustomed to seeing in discourse. The archetype for working through issues that has consistently been modeled is debate. Whether through their families, the media, politics, or workplaces, students have learned to argue and communicate in a way that is comparable to a debate. Educational institutions reinforce this structure by training students to pick a side and argue for it. Research papers are often approached as one-sided arguments, rather than dialogic discussions of a topic. The goal of a debate is to win, often at the expense of others involved. Dialogue offers a

different approach that is more appropriate for the context of a diversity class, in which respect and common ground are essential. The goal of dialogic communication is to seek mutual understanding together. In communicating dialogically, there is not one correct view to uncover, but it remains open-ended (Zuniga et al., 2007). In this way, debate is in stark contrast to dialogue, which has openness and respect as its central tenets.

Without a working knowledge and experience of dialogic principles, many students entered the class with little awareness or practice of the skills that they would be expected to bring forth. Students had not had dialogic skills modeled for them, and therefore had great difficulty adjusting to this foreign way of communicating.

Theme one revealed that learning dialogic skills occurred largely through two class structural elements: the full value contract, and the talking stick. These class structures educated students with the rules of communicating dialogically. It was by these rules that individuals learned what behaviors were to be included as dialogic communication. Along with learning what the skills were, students were also influenced to act dialogically by the structures of the class. The structures enforced dialogic communication behaviors most often through peer-pressure and relational commitment. Students did not want to disappoint their peers and have someone ‘call them out.’ Carrie explained the reason she felt so committed to follow the FVC was “the way that it was created – that if someone was using their phone, you know, other group members had the right to say, ‘You have to put that away.’” By not sticking to the rules that they developed together, the members would find that camaraderie and cohesiveness of the group would appear to be lost. Furthermore, as relationships developed, the possibility of

offending their new friends influenced behavior. Some relationships became so meaningful to students that they felt compelled to remain loyal to those bonds through holding to the FVC. The value of the relational element emerged as an important aspect to developing dialogic communication skills.

Participants were dependent on other members to develop their dialogic skills. Through the dialogic sharing, listening, affirmation, et cetera of other members, students became more comfortable and willing to reciprocate those skills. By reciprocally applying the rules of dialogue, students and facilitators became the models of dialogic communication that they had been lacking. According to Buber (1970, p. 81), the *Thou* “receives its place, its course, its measurability and conditionality” as a result of the reciprocal confrontation with the *I*. Similarly, Bakhtin explained that the person’s own word achieves the finalizing meaning of a fully weighted concept only as a result of reciprocal confrontation and response to the words of others. Students are able to develop the skills of communicating dialogically more readily when they are willing to reciprocate the dialogic behaviors of their group members. If one or more members choose to disengage and not communicate dialogically, then it is less likely the rest of the group would try as hard to create moments of dialogue. Even if the other students put forth all of their effort, it might be a dead end if others in the group are resistant to the process. Dialogic communication, as portrayed by the COM 255 class, is very dependent on the participation and attitudes of all group members. Therefore, the challenge of communicating dialogically is not simply to individually apply dialogic skills, but also to make sure the rest of the group is applying those skills. Enforcing the rules of the FVC

and talking stick seemed to be the most effective way to keep students on track with communicating dialogically.

The talking stick particularly helped to symbolize dialogic communication for students lacking a relevant model. The use of the stick reinforced the skills that constitute dialogic communication. In doing so, the talking stick helped shape the students' practice of dialogue. One value that the talking stick reinforced was listening. Those who did not have the stick were supposed to focus their full attention on what the other person was sharing in order to value their contribution to the co-construction of dialogue. By participating in this way, students followed a model that matches the 'potter's wheel' depiction of dialogic listening put forth by Stewart and Logan (1999). The person sharing feedback adds to what was previously 'put on the wheel' by the one with the stick. In this way, the speakers and the listeners cooperatively work together to sculpt new meaning. The stick caused students to carefully consider their feedback. Students would often be expected to go around the circle and give feedback to the person with the stick. They would listen carefully and think critically about what was shared so they could have valuable feedback to offer their peers. The structure of the talking stick provided a constant reminder that students were required to practice the skill of seeking mutual understanding. As students practiced this skill more and more, they began to value focusing on understanding others as much as putting forth their own ideas.

In summary, this research was able to provide some insight into the ways that dialogic skills are developed. Students entered COM 255b lacking a model for enacting the skills of dialogic communication. The class commitments to the FVC and the talking

stick came to symbolize the process of dialogue, providing a framework for learning the skills. Students were obligated to the structures externally through peer pressure and relational commitment, as well as internally through a genuine desire to create dialogic experiences. They were also dependent on each other to develop their skills. As students practiced the skills of communicating dialogically through the FVC and the talking stick, they became models for one another in a reciprocal fashion. They learned skills from each other as they worked together toward the common goal of mutual understanding. The talking stick was a constant reminder to students that they needed to be using dialogic listening and speaking skills in order to contribute to mutual understanding. In this way, the stick provided a model of dialogic communication that was lacking in America today. Overall, students developed their skills at varying degrees, and some developed fewer due to a lack of willingness to participate in the process.

Research Question Two:  
How do dialogic communication skills  
contribute to relational development?

Communication in dialogue facilitates authentic relationships. Dialogic communication involves sharing honestly and openly with others. The theme ‘risking openness,’ explained how being open in dialogue involved actively engaging in the risk of open-mindedness and vulnerable sharing. Being open-minded included the willingness to learn and truly listen to what others shared. Sharing vulnerably involved a willingness to be real and honest with personal information. Through communicating vulnerably, students risked the judgment of peers. Rosenfeld (2008) explained that self-

disclosure requires courage to “be known and to be perceived by others as one actually is” (p. 4). This dialogic skill of risking openness helps create authentic relationships.

Dialogic communication fosters a faster rate of relational development. As predicted in chapter one, the depth of self-disclosure in dialogue contributed to a faster rate of relational development. The depth dimension in Social Penetration Theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973) represents the layers of information ranging from superficial to “core feelings about life, trust in others, and the nature of one’s self-image” (p. 17). Since disclosure in intergroup dialogue is more risky and topics are embedded in a culturally and historically emotional context, self-disclosure seemed to skip or penetrate more quickly through the outer layers of impersonal information and into the inner layers of personal information. As a result of speeding the process of social penetration, students formed authentic relational bonds at a rate that was not expected for the sixteen-week class. Students were drawn into relationships not only because of the depth of self-disclosure, but through their ability to navigate complex dialectical tensions.

*Three dialectical tensions.* In the dialogue groups, working through social justice issues had a highly relational component. It seems this relational component is the key difference between the communication in dialogue and its counterpart, debate. Students exchanged personal messages that were closely connected to their identities. Communicating dialogically involved a collaborative effort to create a mutual understanding of group members and of social justice. Finding common ground often required students to overcome their unproductive tendencies within key relational

tensions. The descriptions of interviewees revealed three main dialectical tensions: comfort/discomfort, self-focus/other-focus, and supporting others/pushing others.

The choice to either embrace comfort or discomfort impacted the degree to which the students' communication was dialogic. If students were able to embrace discomfort, relational development was often the natural result. Theme two, 'becoming comfortable with discomfort,' was an articulation of this dialectical tension. Interestingly, interviewees described the ground rules of the FVC and the talking stick as a way to ensure a safe and comfortable environment where students were able to trust and be vulnerable with each other. However, literature regarding dialogue has shown that it is a risky endeavor, not necessarily a safe one. Martin Buber said dialogue, "...[tears] us away to dangerous extremes, loosening the well-tryed context, leaving more questions than satisfaction behind them, shattering security" (as cited in Friedman, 2002, p. 68). Students faced competing 'pulls' of pursuing the discomfort of risk, and seeking safety and comfort. In one sense, gaining a level of comfort with the group through methods such as 'warming up' helped students to be willing to risk embracing discomfort and the unknown. This was especially true given the context of the group. Based on the responses of the interviewees, it could be concluded that group members entered with a certain level of insecurity, hurt, anger, et cetera, regarding social justice issues. This emotion seemed to keep them from following the dialogic principles of communication, which involved embracing discomfort. Instead, these students were compelled to engage in a process where their story could be heard.

The ability to balance the pull of comfort and discomfort is key to communicating dialogically. Creating a safe place of relational connection where participants feel comfortable, along with pushing individuals past their comfort zone – risking disconnection – are both important for grasping how dialogic moments can be created through appropriate communication. Students who find that balance often do so by making themselves vulnerable enough to the ideas and emotions of others, and press into that discomfort. It is this place of tension that many participants revered as the ‘learning edge.’ Remaining at ‘the learning edge’ was valued as the way individuals most often reach new levels of understanding. Reaching new understanding provides great incentive to engage more fully in the uncomfortable aspects of the dialogic process, thus reinforcing the value of embracing discomfort. Discomfort will never be entirely eliminated in dialogue. Furthermore, it appears that discomfort is necessary for depth of understanding to occur. Using dialogic skills, students pressed into the tension created by different views. When students were able to find common ground and mutual understanding, relationships were strengthened. However, by choosing not to engage discomfort, students limited the degree of openness – an essential part of relational growth. Therefore, becoming comfortable with pushing through discomfort is a necessary step in the dialogue process and in relational formation.

Another common tension influencing relational development was between ‘focusing on self’ and ‘focusing on others.’ The majority of interviewees described how they began the dialogue group with a self-orientation. They had a desire to share their story so that their voice could be heard. However, after learning about dialogue and

agreeing to communicate dialogically through the full value contract and the talking stick, students began focusing more on what other people were sharing and less on what they wanted to share. All of the participants agreed that a main purpose of the class was to seek and gain understanding from others. With this guiding purpose, participation in the class changed students' focus from only getting others to understand them, to seeking new understanding from others. This behavior is much like the 'ensembled individualism' of Cissna and Anderson (1994), which describes people who are capable of considering others through empathy and openness. This shift in perspective was a sign of growth for group members. Focusing on others, often above oneself, was central to students becoming more 'dialogic' in communicating with others. Neglecting to focus on others limited the learning and mutual understanding that was possible. Conversely, when students began to move toward understanding others in a less selfish way, relationships began to rapidly develop. However, focusing on others can also be done in such a way as to limit dialogic communication. Interviewees gave a description of relationships that involved such a great focus on supporting others that other dialogic values were devalued, namely challenging ideas.

The efforts to support one another and push one another in dialogue are often in competition. Interviewees described how the communication among their classmates often resembled that of a support group. These students described the support function as possibly the greatest reason for relational development. Supportive action was key to the group's vitality. Feeling heard fostered a reciprocal commitment to one another. Interestingly, developing relationships of support was not a central goal of the class. The

great emphasis put on relationships actually distracted one group from the main goal of challenging self and others to be open-minded and seek mutual understanding.

Therefore, too much focus on being supportive is harmful to the progress of the group.

Members are not often challenged to think differently. By valuing support above pushing others past their comfort zone, the group remains stagnant.

The excessive focus on supporting others keeps members from creating mutual meaning together. According to Buber (1970, p. 81), the *Thou* “receives its place, its course, its measurability and conditionality” as a result of the reciprocal confrontation with the *I*. Bakhtin similarly described how the person’s own word achieves the finalizing meaning of a fully weighted concept only as a result of reciprocal confrontation and response to the words of others (Shields, 2003). Meaning is created when individuals mutually work through ideas. It is often perceived that mutual understanding requires a high level of empathy. However, based on Bakhtinian ideology, Shields (1994, p. 386) concluded that the “empathic aspect of *Verstehen* (understanding)” has the effect of silencing the other by masking differences. Synthesizing the ideas of others into our own without specifying difference can blur the lines between humans and their uniqueness. Therefore, the excitement and learning from dialogue is numbed by the lack of tension and appreciation of difference. Students no longer engage in applying the skills of dialogue. Buber describes these students as ‘human being’ rather than ‘human becoming’ because they are stagnant and unwilling to engage in the coordination of mutual understanding. In this study, students raised the value of supporting others so high that they seemed to value empathy above pushing others to process their differences

and possibly think differently. This tension takes on a delicate balance within the dynamics of connecting in relationships. Although offering support did encourage the rapid formation of relationships, it seemed that challenging others led to more authentic relationships. In order to effectively navigate the tension of supporting and pushing others, students should make sure offering support does not impede the value of challenging the ideas of others. One implication of focusing too much on supporting others is that it creates an environment of students who become coddled and develop expectations that are focused on comfort. If these students then receive communication outside of those expectations they will shut down. They become unwilling to learn from others, or share something they hold as true. Therefore, neither supporting nor challenging is effective. This was the case in the event of “the switch.”

The communication surrounding the event of “the switch” made the process of relational development very interesting for one group. The group grew very close in the first class period. This closeness caused members to take conflicts, or acts in violation of the ground rules, very personally. Balancing the dialectical tensions in this group proved to be arduous. One particular instance, referred to as “the switch,” caused the groups to lose the foundational elements for relating, namely trust and respect. When instructors switched a student to create an equal representation of social identity groups, students felt that the instructors were discriminating. Students lost trust in the facilitators and in the principles on which the class was built. Trust has been identified as the “integral feature” of all human relationships (Larzelere & Huston, 1980, p. 595). Zuniga et al. (2007, p. 14) concluded “trust grows and is tested as dialogue participants feel freer and more

confident to raise difficult questions, challenge each other, express anger, offer support, and continue the conversation.” Although most students were able to adjust to the changes and recommit to the dialogue process, some students were not. The mistrust and the lack of participation of a few individuals seemed to keep the group from fully believing that the process could work in the way they learned it could. It seemed members became frustrated and lost some hope in the process, because certain members were unwilling to adapt and give the instructors the benefit of the doubt. The behavior of some students was not productive for resolving the conflict. These students demonstrated the conflict styles of competing and avoiding. According to Thomas and Kilmann (1974), the competing style involves a high concern for self, and a low concern for others. The focus of the competing style, by which the students operated, is winning. The avoiding style includes low concern for self and higher concern for others (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974). The attitude with the avoiding style is to withdraw and by doing so, assure that both self and other lose. This attitude was present in a few students, which led to a drawn out effort for conflict resolution.

As a result of being unable to resolve the conflict of the switch in any significant way, the group dynamic completely changed. Students became more hesitant to communicate with vulnerability. A couple of students not only refused to comply with the rules and flow of dialogic communication, but also frequently interrupted that flow with their complaints. These students kept the group from their potential in dialogue by infecting it with a bad attitude, and distracting members from the social justice topics that they were trying to explore. By focusing on themselves, these students demonstrated a

lack of concern with the dialogic life of the group. Buber (1970, p. 19) wrote, “there is a genuine dialogue – no matter whether spoken or silent – where each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular beings and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them.” This group lost some sense of experiencing ‘genuine dialogue’ because the dialogic communication that ‘establishes relationship’ was not present by all participants. This was further evidenced by the apparent decrease in the rate and depth of relational growth following the switch.

This research revealed how relational bonds were formed in unique ways when group members applied the skills of dialogic communication. According to Zuniga et al. (2007), communication in dialogue is a process that builds a relationship between participants that engages the heart as well as the intellect. The aspect of dialogic communication that most sets it apart from other communication formats, such as debate, is the focus on developing relationships. Dialogic skills appear to facilitate the development of more authentic relationships. Dialogic skills also contribute to a faster rate of relational growth. Dialogic communication enables students to overcome potentially harmful relational tensions. For COM 255b, these tensions involved the students’ struggles with discomfort, self-focus, and being too supportive. It seemed overcoming these tendencies naturally led to the rapid formation of relational bonds. It was in this environment that reciprocal self-disclosure and listening led to trust, social penetration, and the beginnings of committed relationships. Choosing to communicate dialogically is a means for achieving the goal of ally relationships.

Research Question Three:  
How do dialogic communication skills contribute to  
personal understanding of social justice issues?

Martin Buber stated that dialogue could be a remedy to the powerful force of hatred. For many interviewees, the firsthand experience of hearing others share their stories really made issues of social justice more personal. It became clear to them that social justice issues are not simple matters with easy solutions. Rather, social justice issues are about people who each have a unique story and context for injustice. By gaining new perspectives from their group members, students were able to develop some appreciation for the many perspectives to consider and the many levels of meaning. Students learned that they could not simply ‘pigeon-hole’ individuals into a certain category of beliefs. Just knowing one thing about a person, such as their race, is not enough. This narrow-mindedness is a type of stereotyping known as totalizing (Wood, 1999). According to Wood (1999, p. 169), totalizing is a type of communicating that “emphasizes one aspect of a person above all others.” For example, many students were surprised to hear some of the experiences and convictions that other members had because they assumed these students would not know anything about prejudice just by the way they looked or acted. The moments of dialogue in the groups seemed to broaden the minds of students, helping them be slow to assume they know everything about a person by the way the person looks or acts.

According to Bakhtin, it is not the “empathetic union of I and the other that characterizes responsibility, but the absolute difference that summons the charity of non-indifference” (Shields, 2003, p. 386). It is not the ability to empathize with others that is

of most importance, rather the ability to be charitable to those who are different. The ability to listen without judgment appears to lead to ‘a-ha’ moments of understanding regarding social justice. One of the key ways that students expressed they had no intention to judge was through the use of clarifying and probing questions. By asking these questions with genuine concern, students were able to show that they did not fully understand the experiences or beliefs of another member, but they wanted to. Asking these questions helped students to discover the ‘why’ behind the beliefs and actions of others. Through listening with vulnerability, individuals took a risk in opening themselves up to the ideas and experiences of others. Students referred to this place of ‘risking openness’ as the “learning edge.” It was this edge that students revered as the place of gaining understanding from others. They were more and more willing to press into the discomfort of the learning edge when they were able to experience the understanding that resulted.

The Program on Intergroup Relations (IGR) (2008) at U of M gave a description of the learning edge that matches the experiences of students in this study. They explained,

Being on this edge means that we may feel annoyed, angry, anxious, surprised, confused, defensive, or in some other way uncomfortable. These reactions are a natural part of the process of expanding our comfort zones, and when we recognize them as such, we can use them as part of the learning process. (The Program on Intergroup Relations, 2009, handout)

The goal in balancing this tension is to push through enough discomfort to learn from others. The IGR Program (2009) claimed, “The challenge is to recognize when we are on a learning edge and then stay there with the discomfort we are experiencing to see what we can learn.” In this study, many students were able to develop the skill of remaining in the learning edge. Although there were instances where some became easily provoked, students did develop their ability to seek understanding in uncomfortable situations. The reward of gaining understanding and depth of relationship provided incentive for further risk and effort to stay in the learning edge. One key skill to remaining in the learning edge is the ability to engage in the complexities of silence.

Herakova, Jelaca, Sibii, and Cooks (2011) described their experiences and observations of silence in campus dialogues about race. They observed,

Learning cannot be pre-given by the declaration of a space for dialogue, but rather arises in moments of connection within difference, silence, and awe. Learning happens when we choose not to fill those moments with our own endings and judgments, but see them as posing questions in spaces where we previously had answers. (p. 374)

The silences were referred to as spaces for learning. This depiction of silence is identical to the stories of students in COM 255b. It was in these spaces that students learned or had “a-ha” moments of understanding. Therefore, the precise location of the ‘learning edge’ appears to reside within these moments of silent reflection.

Relating to social justice, the value of silence has diminished, “we’ve been taught to perceive silences as either deceptive or passive, but certainly not beneficial and not

something to be encouraged. Not speaking up, we had thought, is a matter of *staying* silent, rather than *going* silent” (Herakova et al., 2011, p. 384). With this statement Herakova et al. (2011) shed light on the way that individuals of minority have lacked a voice with which to address the injustices they face. When these individuals choose to remain silent rather than address an issue related to their social identity, it is perceived as “hard for him/her to suddenly find voice after having been silenced his/her whole life” (Herakova et al., 2011, p. 384). Herakova et al. (p. 387) concluded, “...the complexities of silences open up new spaces for critically engaging with the world, as it is lived, felt, and experienced – a move toward reflective and active citizenship.” Students in COM 255b recognized the power of silence, both to learn and to feel the weight of social justice discrepancies. It was in those places of silence that dialogue appeared most productive for the cause of social justice. Honing the skill of reflective silence seemed to have a direct impact on the confidence students had in articulating their thoughts and beliefs.

The COM 255b groups provided a safe place where students could begin to articulate their own perspective on social justice issues. Participants gained confidence to address complex issues that were often emotionally charged. They learned how to respectfully ‘hold their ground’ and share honestly with people having different views. The development of this skill was empowering to individuals who had an identity that caused them to lack a voice. Many felt encouraged to not simply regurgitate the ideas of others, but rather develop their own convictions about different topics of concern. Students would process their own ideas about a topic through quiet reflection as well as through what many called “stream of consciousness” sharing. By speaking somewhat

freely with minimal filtering of their thoughts individuals were able to communicate both inter- and intra-personally. By speaking with a minimal filter, students revealed more of their raw thoughts to others as well as to themselves. In this way, sharing was like an active journal. This risky type of self-disclosure epitomizes vulnerability and allows for other members to truly enter into the space of another individual and collaborate in creating mutual understanding.

One important way that dialogic skills led to an increased understanding of social justice was through a new or increased desire to form ally relationships. Although ally relationships are often loosely defined as people joined for a common purpose, Washington and Evans (1991) clarified that the definition of an ally as it relates to oppression is “A person who is a member of the ‘dominant’ or ‘majority’ group who works to end oppression in his or her personal and professional life through support of, and as an advocate with and for the oppressed population.” As students with oppressed identities mingled with students of dominant identities, the potential for ally relationships became quite strong. Some students were part of a dominant identity as well as an oppressed one. These students naturally had the ability and the desire to empathize with members of oppressed populations and become an ally for them, or more of one. Other students found themselves situated in the dominant population for most every category. For these students a much greater potential for being an ally existed. This research found that many students developed their desire to advocate for oppressed groups as an ally. These students referred to personal conversations with individuals as proof of their activism. Although these conversations primarily helped to clarify the misguided

perception of individuals, most interviewees found that the individual level of change is not enough.

Some interviewees felt that even though there was some hope to be gained through the class at the individual level, the real issue lies at the systemic level. Through the class, students became convinced that members of the dominant group must take more responsibility for the current systemic and institutional oppression. Hardiman, Jackson, and Griffin (2007) described social oppression as “distinct from brute force in that it is an interlocking system that involves domination and control of the social ideology, as well as of the social institutions and resources of the society” (p. 36). The problem of social oppression is much more complex than just random acts of violence or discrimination. These and other forms of unequal treatment are institutionalized and systematic. “Once institutionalized, these acts often do not require the conscious thought or effort of individual members of oppressor groups but are part of normalized practices, policies, and beliefs that become embedded in social structures.” By recognizing how the systemic level of oppression has influenced them, students were able to see the personal changes they could make to act as an ally and contribute to a more just society. Students learned that fighting for justice in one identity group was not enough. The oppression of each social group is connected in what students referred to as the ‘web of oppression.’

Through learning about the web of oppression, students were better situated to understand the words of Audra Lorde. Lorde (1983) argued, “There is no hierarchy of oppression.” She writes,

Any attack against black people is a lesbian and gay issue, because I and

thousands of other black women are part of the lesbian community. Any attack against lesbians and gays is a Black issue, because thousands of lesbians and gay men are black. There is no hierarchy of oppression. I cannot afford the luxury of fighting one form of oppression only. I cannot afford to believe that freedom from intolerance is the right of only one particular group. And I cannot afford to choose between the fronts upon which I must battle these forces of discrimination.

(Lorde, 1983, p. 1)

Interviewees consistently referred to this idea of there being no hierarchy of oppression as something they really internalized in the class. Through the deep sharing of personal stories of discrimination, students were able to see how it is not really possible to compare the severity of one person's oppression and pain with that of another. They also learned that they were not alone in their struggles. Through experiencing dialogic moments with each other, students found the most important thing is realizing that each form of oppression is connected with the others. Therefore, addressing a matter relating to one group's oppression will benefit the other groups. Similarly, acts of discrimination towards one group will also oppress others.

This level of learning for students seemed to be a direct result of the way dialogic communication exposed real feelings, beliefs, and stories. By seeing the change in some individuals to become more understanding, open, and just, students gained hope. However, that hope seemed to be overtaken by the reality that it did not seem like a big enough change. Many students wanted to see the world changed, but they only were able to experience changes in a few people. A question that should be engaged for students is

“Is this class making a difference?” It appears that although students tended to be pessimistic, they might recognize that change at the individual level is where systemic change begins. Systems and institutions are made of individuals. It could be that the nearsightedness of the class made students discount the value of individual level change.

Developing confidence in communicating about social justice empowered individuals with the skills needed to explore difficult topics that are embedded in a complicated and emotional historical context. They learned to see the value of exploring these topics in conversation. The firsthand experience of hearing others share their stories really made issues of social justice more personal. Unlike the traditional diversity class, students in COM 255b were able to see the vulnerability and hear about real-life oppression from classmates with whom they developed a relationship. Students found that individual level change is not enough to solve the problems of oppression. However, through the efforts to learn and create moments of dialogue individuals were empowered to speak about social justice issues. Since dialogue is an avenue to empower people with understanding and communication ability, it seems conceivable that these individuals could come together and fight systematic oppression.

#### The Dialogic Flow Model: Tying It All Together

The process of dialogue for the COM 255b class contained many of the characteristics of dialogue mentioned by Cissna and Anderson (1994). The process involved *emergent unanticipated consequences*, which made the communication more an act of improvisation than predictable. This was evidenced with the presence of “stream

of consciousness” sharing. Students also had to refrain from assuming they knew the thoughts and intentions of others, but rather to have a *recognition of strange otherness*. Another important characteristic was *vulnerability*, the willingness to be open about one’s thoughts and be influenced by others. Through *mutual implication* students included the utterances of others into their own speech. Students also became aware of the *temporal flow* of dialogue, that dialogue “emerges from the past, fills the immediate present, and anticipates an open future” (p. 15). Finally, students were encouraged to seek honesty in disclosing significant thoughts and feelings relevant to the dialogue. These are some of the important characteristics of dialogue that enabled students to enter into an environment that was safe for creating meaning together.

In the midst of complexity, this research did identify some patterns of communicating. These patterns do not describe the way the groups always functioned, but provide some insight into the communication that occurred. For the purpose of summarizing the patterns of communicating in the dialogue groups, this research found communication was generally aligned with the following pattern: safe environment/trust, vulnerability, reciprocation, conflict, ‘aha’ understanding, and some achievement of class goals. The unfolding of this pattern occasionally led to moments of genuine dialogue.

In dialogue, there must be a safe environment as a foundation, or context, for the quality of dialogic communication. Keys to a safe environment included an overall commitment to the ground rules: confidentiality, listening without judgment, focusing on others, mutual implication through paraphrase-plus, allowing silence, genuineness, showing kindness, and affirmation. When group members sought these behaviors, the

quality of communication was likely to increase. This reality was buffered by the fact that too much focus on affirmation and comfort led to a decrease in the quality of communication as revealed by the outcomes of mistrust and disinterest. Therefore, a commitment to embracing discomfort was as necessary as safety for acting vulnerable.

The presence of safety allowed for actions of openness and trust, namely vulnerability. Honest and vulnerable sharing and listening were much more likely to occur upon the foundation of a safe environment than in an uncertain or even hostile environment. Expression of authentic emotion and ‘stream of consciousness’ sharing were also more likely when the group had some level of safety. A safe environment seemed to minimize the inevitable risk of being vulnerable. Finally, a willingness to learn through vulnerable listening became possible when students trusted that others were trying to be honest and genuine.

After one or more students expressed vulnerability in sharing and listening, other members were more willing to reciprocate those actions. The level of sharing and open-minded listening is often dependent on the group as a whole. If one person was not cooperating to act dialogically, then everyone was affected and the group’s level of engagement diminished. The group would lack cohesiveness, which negated any willingness or desire from members to engage in dialogue. However, contrarily, the full engagement of individuals in the group could inspire others to do the same.

Mutual sharing and listening that was vulnerable often led to ‘a-ha’ moments of understanding. These were moments when students were open to the ideas and experiences of their classmates. Sometimes these moments led to a changed mind or a

paradigm shift in perspective. In some instances, the willingness to gain understanding from others resulted in accomplishing the goals of the class. Students would experience important outcomes: Gain appreciation and respect for the perspectives of others and learn from them; Develop allies for their particular identity; Develop more commitment to social justice issues and being an ally for others; and Increase their confidence with topics and personal ability to communicate about them. After students reached this level of understanding, confidence, and relational connection, it seemed likely that they would believe more in the process. Therefore, gaining trust and security to address issues of social justice would cause the process to continue beginning with a safe environment of trust.

#### Limitations

The choice to study the COM 255b pilot course at CMU came at the cost of having a sample that contained greater external validity. Also, with more volunteers the participants could have been more evenly distributed across the two groups. Two participants were from one group, and six from the other. This gave preference to one group's experience of dialogue, rather than a more balanced view from two equally represented groups.

It is likely that a degree of recall accuracy was lost due to the gathering of interviews 3-4 months after the students finished the class. Students might have forgotten important stories or details from their group. Also, it is possible that the stories they did share could have contained a higher degree of inaccuracy. However, gathering interviews later did have the benefit of allowing interviewees the chance to reflect and

gain clarity without the influence of immediate emotional responses. A pre-test survey might have aided by revealing the progress of students' dialogic ability. By having data representing participants' prior knowledge and ability in dialogic communication, this research could have gained a standard of comparison to better determine what skills were learned through the class and how much improvement students made in those areas.

Another limitation is that it seemed most of the students that chose to be interviewed were those that got a lot out of the experience, or were possibly already committed to the process of dialogue. This would make the data possibly biased towards favorable outcomes. Also, students might have not been completely honest about their experiences in an effort to save face. This is especially possible considering the level of sharing that can occur in dialogue. Also, the fact that three of the participants knew the researcher might have affected the level and type of sharing in the interviews.

Despite following the proper procedures in conducting interviews and developing the interview guide, the researcher has limited experience with giving qualitative interviews and analyzing them. There were many interesting topics and concepts that could have been the focus within the interviews and the subsequent analysis. It could be that the choices made in this research with regards to which stories and concepts were most important might have not been the best choices.

### Future Research

This study was important for extending our knowledge of how dialogic communication skills are developed, and how they contribute to the goals of the COM 255 class at CMU. This study was somewhat broad in its scope, looking at multiple types

of communication skills. It laid some of the groundwork for operationalizing more definitive behaviors that would classify as skills of dialogue. Although this method was needed to gain a grounded understanding of communication in dialogue, future studies could focus on one skill to explore it in greater depth.

Further research is needed to clarify how specific skills are developed and utilized to reach the goals of the class. Specifically, understanding the use of conflict skills in dialogue might help to show how the unique nature of conflict in intergroup dialogue can be resolved. Furthermore, the development of conflict skills might have value for handling the pull of dialogue groups to become too supportive, while also keeping individuals from shutting down. As was reflected in this study, it is expected that future research will further reveal the complexity of the process of dialogue. The multiple dialectical tensions that were identified in this study reveal that the process of dialogue is not always consistent. Rather, it is based on the unpredictable motivations and actions of individuals. The ebb and flow of the dialectic approach is a more 'organic' paradigm that seems consistent with life in the real world. Future research should consider using this theoretical perspective to approach the study of dialogue.

Research is necessary to better understand how students can maintain the 'learning edge.' The learning edge was described by participants in this study as being a place in dialogic interaction where a person experiences a great deal of discomfort for the purpose of gaining understanding from others. The discomfort could arise from the presence of conflicting ideas or beliefs that often bring up a lot of emotions. It could also come from a lack of willingness to learn from others and not push one's own view. The

ability to push past the discomfort appeared to be key in maintaining a ‘learning edge.’ Further analysis is needed to understand how students can remain at the ‘edge.’ It appears that an increased knowledge of best practices for handling conflict in the unique context of dialogue would allow more insight into the learning edge.

A longitudinal methodology would benefit future research of dialogic communication skills. A study conducted over many years would help to determine how long students actually hold on to the things they learned and experienced in dialogue. This type of study would help discover whether or not students continue to apply the communication skills they learned; develop their ability to navigate conflict in a way that maintains the balance of trust and the learning edge; talk and learn about social justice issues; or seek to form ally relationships.

Finally, gathering observational data of the class through the use of videotaping would provide a unique perspective for studying communication in dialogue. Following the observable qualities of students throughout the semester would create more reliable evidence of the skills that are enacted and developed. Furthermore, gaining observable data would help to understand the process or phases of dialogue by offering insight into the visible and actual communication that occurred. However, unless the cameras were hidden, the natural group functioning would be greatly hindered. This type of study would require careful planning to overcome the difficulty of collecting data of this nature.

### Summary

The purpose of this thesis was to better understand of the role of communication in intergroup dialogue programs. This research confirmed the assumption that students

are rarely provided with a model for communicating dialogically. Therefore, the structures of the class proved to be very beneficial for the development of dialogue skills. Students learned the skills mostly from the agreed upon rules of the class and the pressure from peers to abide by them. The use of dialogue skills created a safe environment wherein relationships developed quickly. The presence of multiple dialogic tensions revealed the complexity of relating dialogically in intergroup dialogues. Students naturally tended to put too much focus on themselves, supporting others, and finding comfort. Overcoming these tendencies was a sign of growth in dialogue skills. The confidence students developed in communicating about social justice empowered them with the skills needed to explore difficult topics that are embedded in a complicated and emotional historical context.

## APPENDICES

APPENDIX A  
INTERVIEW GUIDE

Rapport

1. *Tell me about yourself.*
2. *What led you to take/facilitate this class? Any personal reasons?*

Dialogue

3. *To the best of your ability, define dialogue for me. (paraphrase them)*
4. *Describe a typical experience in your dialogue group?*

Communication

5. *What did the communication look like in your dialogue group? (types of behaviors). Can you offer a time when the communication worked well? Can you share a time when the communication did not work well?*
6. *Offer an example of a time you shared personal information with the group? How did you feel?*
7. *Why is it important for you to share with the group?*
8. *Tell me about the role of listening in dialogue.*
9. *Do you have an example of an instance when you listened well or poorly? Explain your behavior.*
10. *How did you handle moments of tension in the group? Specific example?*
11. *How did the level of tension change throughout the semester? Did abilities to handle tension improve or get worse?*

Relationships

12. *How did your relationships with your classmates develop? What do you most attribute it to? Specific example?*

Social Justice

13. *After taking this class, what is your understanding of social justice issues? How does this class compare to other SJ classes you have taken?*
14. *How have your communication skills changed?*
15. *Offer an example of a time in the past month or two that you engaged in an interaction on campus that involved social justice issues. How was the communication? More effective since taking this class?*

Takeaway

16. *Is there anything we haven't talked about yet, that you would like to share in regards to communicating in your dialogue group?*

## APPENDIX B

### ADULT CONSENT FORM

Study Title: Communication Skills and Outcomes in Intergroup Dialogue

Research Investigators' Names and Departments (include Advisor, if researcher is a student): Adam Agosta, Shelly Hinck (Advisor)

Contact information for researcher and advisor:

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#### **Introductory Statement**

Thank you for participating in this study! The details of this study are provided in this consent form. If you have any questions at any point about this study please feel free to ask now or contact me later.

**What is the purpose of this study?** This research will analyze communication skills and outcomes related to the intergroup dialogue class COM 255. The results will help to better understand the role of dialogic communication in intergroup dialogue settings.

**What will I do in this study?** The study will use interviews to explore communication skills and relational outcomes of the COM 255 course. Eight students total from COM 255 will be interviewed. Students will be drawn from each of the two dialogue groups.

**How long will it take me to do this?** The interview will last 45-60 minutes.

**Are there any risks of participating in the study?** The questions that will be asked in the interviews will relate to the ways you communicated with your group, as well as your relationship with other members. It is possible that the questions might cause you to feel uncomfortable by leading you to think about/or respond to an experience with the group. You will not be required to share anything you feel uncomfortable sharing. At any point in this research (i.e. prior, during, or after) you are free to opt out of participating if you feel too uncomfortable.

**What are the benefits of participating in the study?** Participants will gain personal awareness of communication skills and the effectiveness of their efforts to build mutual understanding. Your participation will help further the current understanding and practice of intergroup dialogue. Improving this class and the application of dialogic communication should contribute to an increase in building bridges across cultural barriers, and tearing down the walls that divide. This will help decrease the amount of hate speech and hate crimes on campus, as well as foster a more equal and understanding community at CMU.

**Will anyone know what I do or say in this study (Confidentiality)?** The primary investigator, Adam Agosta, will be the only one with access to your identifying information. All of the research data gathered from this study will, if disclosed, be presented in a manner that does not reveal your identity, except as may be required by law. The audiotapes that will be used to record the interviews will be stored in a secure place in the home of Adam Agosta. After the study is completed the tapes and transcripts will be destroyed.

**Who can I contact for information about this study?**

Adam Agosta, Email: [agostlad@cmich.edu](mailto:agostlad@cmich.edu), Phone: (989)-400-0066

You are free to refuse to participate in this research project or to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation in the project at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your participation will not affect your relationship with the institution(s) involved in this research project.

If you are not satisfied with the manner in which this study is being conducted, you may report (anonymously if you so choose) any complaints to the Institutional Review Board by calling 989-774-6777, or addressing a letter to the Institutional Review Board, 251 Foust Hall Central Michigan University, Mt. Pleasant, MI 48859.

*My signature below indicates that all my questions have been answered. I agree to participate in the project as described above.*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Subject

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date Signed

*A copy of this form has been given to me.* \_\_\_\_\_ Subject's Initials

**For the Research Investigator**—I have discussed with this subject the procedure(s) described above and the risks involved; I believe he/she understands the contents of the consent document and is competent to give legally effective and informed consent.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Responsible Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date Signed

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