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Moving from Dialogue to Deliberation about Campus Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

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Students from non-dominant communities have long faced discrimination and harassment on higher education campuses, which can undermine these students' sense of belonging, alienate them from university governance, and harm their wellbeing and ability to learn (Barnett, 2020; Wade et al., 2019). In response, universities have strived to address these campus social justice issues by promoting learning about diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the co-curriculum and curriculum (United States Department of Education, 2016). Contemporary DEI education takes an intersectional approach by examining how multiple axes of privilege and oppression – such as race, gender, age, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, ability, religion, nationality and citizenship – can affect social justice on campus (Clason & McKnight, 2018).

Increasingly, undergraduates' DEI education begins with student orientation programs that involve experiential learning about how power, privilege, and oppression can affect the campus community (French et al., 2021; Lechuga et al., 2009). This programming often mixes training in intercultural competency delivered online with intergroup dialogue, in which students of diverse backgrounds engage in small group, face-to-face discussion to build mutual understanding of how socialization has shaped their own and others' identities, and build positive communication and collaboration skills to bridge their differences. For many students, orientation is a foundational introduction not only to DEI, but also to experiential learning, in college.

Students appear to reap significant benefits from experiencing intergroup dialogue about DEI. Research across multiple universities finds that these dialogues help students to develop greater under-

standing of inequalities based on race, gender, and income; attitudes of cognitive openness, positivity, and efficacy in intergroup situations; empathy and motivation to bridge differences across groups; and participation in intergroup action during college (see, e.g., French et al., 2021; Gurin et al., 2011). Affective learning and effective communication (aimed at appreciating difference, self-reflection, and alliance building) especially enhance these effects (Gurin-Sands et al., 2012). Intergroup dialogue also contributes to students' civic education by developing their commitment to engage in social and political action after college (Gurin et al., 2011).

While these findings are encouraging, experiential education to advance DEI on campuses faces ongoing challenges, two of which this article addresses. One challenge is *how to engage some students more fully in DEI learning*. Many educators have found that some students especially resist learning about DEI experientially by participating in dialogue about difference, privilege, and oppression in diverse groups (French et al., 2021). For example, students from dominant groups can fear that they will be attacked or shamed in these discussions, while students from non-dominant groups may anticipate having to deal with their more privileged peers' insensitivities and micro-aggressions, or bearing the burden of defending their group and educating members of other groups about oppression.

A second challenge is *how to connect DEI learning in the curriculum and co-curriculum*. There are few detailed descriptions and evaluations of intergroup dialogue pedagogy in either the curriculum or co-curriculum (for examples, see Gordon et al., 2017; Ouedraogo, 2021; Pugh, 2014). Research says little about how to build on students' introduction to campus DEI in orientation and deepen this learning throughout

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students' college careers (Barnett, 2020). A few institutions have invited students to participate actively in designing DEI programs to improve campus climate (United States Department of Education, 2016). However, many institutions do not integrate efforts for DEI led by student affairs staff with relevant academic instruction led by the faculty (Lepeau et al., 2018). This may be a missed opportunity to help students connect their understanding of the interpersonal experience of oppression (learned in co-curricular intergroup dialogue) with analyzing how to create institutional and systemic change to advance DEI (in the formal curriculum) (French et al., 2021).

One promising response is for faculty and staff to collaborate on developing opportunities for students to move from intergroup dialogue to deliberation with diverse peers about how to address the challenges to DEI learning. Unlike dialogue, in which participants focus on achieving mutual understanding across differences, deliberation asks participants to come to a collective decision about how their community should take action. These decisions may be arrived at by consensus or voting, and can take the form of recommendations to decision makers, prioritizing a set of options, or adopting new rules, regulations, and practices (Karpowitz & Raphael, 2014).

This article reports on a whole-class project in which undergraduates worked with their professor and student life staff to engage other students in campus forums about how to strengthen learning about DEI in student orientation and beyond, and generated recommendations for action for campus administration. The author, who taught the course, draws implications for how experiential pedagogy involving deliberation can be used to enhance student investment in learning about DEI and student voice in designing this kind of learning.

Description of the Practice

Context and Goals

The course was taught at a private, Jesuit, liberal arts university during the winter of 2021, which presented a window of opportunity for making institutional progress on DEI, especially for racial justice. In the prior year, university leadership had elevated investment in a more racially diverse faculty and student body to a top strategic priority, launched a search for the institution's first Vice-President for DEI, and commissioned an external audit of campus policing focused especially on the experiences of students of color. These changes responded to wider demands for racial justice in policing nationally and on cam-

puses, the polarizing 2020 Presidential campaign and its aftermath (including the January 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol involving white nationalist and white supremacist groups), and frustration across many campuses at the slow pace of progress toward DEI.

However, the project was also constrained by students' ambiguous relationship to the campus community during the COVID-19 pandemic, when almost all students were living off campus. Students took the course remotely and in a hybrid format, mixing synchronous course meetings with asynchronous online discussions. All class meetings and student consultations were conducted live via video conferencing.

The project formed the centerpiece of an advanced undergraduate elective for Communication majors, which also attracted non-majors interested in fulfilling a general education requirement in civic education. The course introduced students to the theory and practice of dialogue and deliberation in groups, organizations, and institutions. Student Life staff at the campus Office of Multicultural Learning (OML), which designs and delivers the DEI components of student orientation, served as the class's client. OML staff posed initial questions they wanted students' feedback on, gave input on the project design, and responded to the class's final report and recommendations. The class of 25 students collaborated to design the format and agenda, reach out to student clubs and professors to recruit participants, facilitate ten small-group discussions, compile and analyze student responses and recommendations, evaluate the quality of the deliberation, and draft and present the final report.

The project's learning goals for students in the course included:

- Applying theory and research on dialogue and deliberation to design a public forum
- Applying facilitation skills to small-group discussions
- Analyzing and synthesizing qualitative and quantitative data (student participant responses)
- Creating a final report and presentation for a client
- Collaborating with faculty, staff, and students to inform institutional policy and practice.

The course design allowed students to draw on their prior experience of intergroup dialogue about DEI during their own student orientation to complete an authentic task of consulting other students on behalf of campus staff. The main experiential education components were project-based learning (in designing, facilitating, and evaluating the forums) and action learning (in producing and presenting recommendations to OML).

The project also addressed the institutional goal of strengthening DEI education on campus. As the client, OML defined the main questions for student deliberations, including:

- What would increase student engagement in DEI in orientation?
- What should students learn and what are the best ways to introduce these topics?
- Which topics should be addressed in the online components and which should be addressed in face-to-face discussions?

Instructional Practice

Figure 1 summarizes how the course implemented Kolb's (1984) cycle of experiential learning, representing student activities in boxes and the educator's role between boxes (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). In Kolb's model, students learn by encountering concrete experiences, observing them reflectively, acquiring or developing abstract ideas to explain or respond to these experiences, and actively experimenting with these ideas. Educators support learners throughout the cycle by facilitating reflection, introducing expert knowledge to help learners make sense of experience, setting standards for how learners apply these new concepts, and coaching learners to evaluate their experimentation with ideas. In this theory, students make the greatest learning gains when educators choose experiences that are relevant to students' own lives and social reality, involve tasks that are authentic to professional or civic work, and engage students in multiple cycles of learning that help students to practice learning from experience (Kolb, 1984).

The project included two major kinds of *concrete experiences*. First, students reactivated their prior experience of DEI in new student orientation by com-

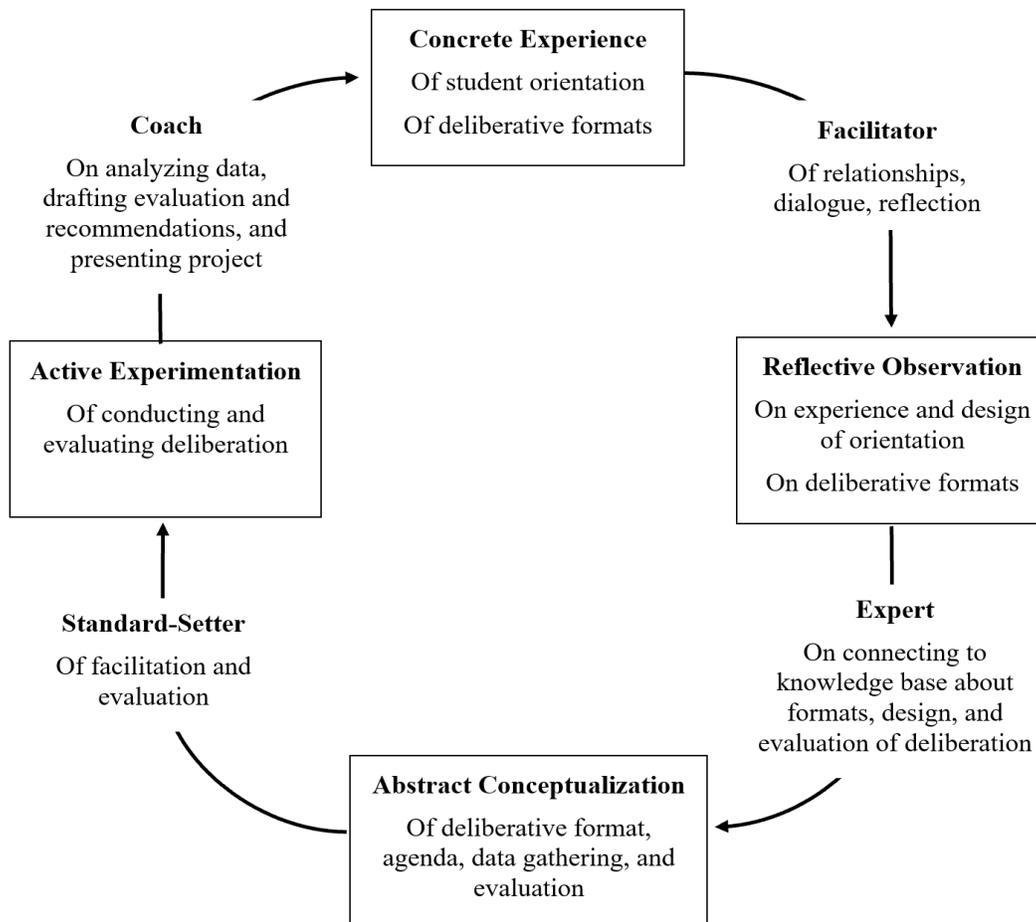


Figure 1: Implementation of Kolb's Cycle of Experiential Learning

pleting the same online modules about definitions of key concepts (e.g., diversity, equity, inclusion, microaggressions) and engaging in intergroup dialogue about these issues. Second, students participated in a variety of formats for dialogue and deliberation during class meetings. Each class engaged students in discussing readings by breaking out into small groups and employing a different format for dialogue about their prior experiences, or for deliberation to discuss, prioritize, and select options for designing the project. The instructor chose formats to use in classes that aligned best with the goals of the forums students would design later in the course, so they could draw on their experience of participating in each format before choosing one for their class project.

To help students move toward *reflective observation*, the instructor facilitated students' working relationships with one another by creating the agendas for students' small group discussions about orientation and deliberative formats, and ensuring that all students rotated through the roles of discussion leader and note-taker, as these skills would be necessary for conducting the forums. In this phase, students need to feel safe from negative judgements to engage in reflection on social justice issues (Pugh, 2014). Therefore, the class adopted a set of communication agreements patterned on those used in the orientation dialogues, which outlined how students would speak, listen, and care for themselves and others, and the instructor reminded students of the agreements before potentially challenging discussions. The instructor also established students' relationship with OML staff by facilitating a brainstorming session in which students developed questions about the project for staff, inviting staff to meet with students and respond to questions during class time, and moderating this initial meeting to clarify project goals and agree on deliverables that would be useful to OML. Students also read the extensive facilitation guide OML used to lead the orientation dialogues, which gave students a peek behind the curtain at how intergroup dialogues are organized and the learning theory that informs them. Students reflected on the guide in individual postings to an online discussion board and in live-class, small-group discussions about which elements of the dialogues students personally found most or least educative about DEI, and which elements of intergroup dialogue would be most helpful for the class to employ in its forum design. These discussions elicited both individual and collective critical thinking, which are valuable for reflective observation about social justice, especially because they allow students to compare their experiences and thinking with the perspectives of a diverse group of peers (Pugh, 2014).

Next, designing the forums required *abstract conceptualization* about how to choose a deliberative format, and design an agenda and data gathering methods that would meet the project goals. At this stage, the instructor introduced prior research and theory by assigning readings about forum design and about several relevant formats for the project. Students contributed ideas about the pros and cons of adopting or adapting each format in online discussion postings and used each format in their live class discussions about elements of the project design. After deliberation and consultation with the client, students chose an Appreciative Inquiry format (Ludema et al., n.d.), which focused participants on naming the organization's existing strengths (in how DEI was introduced in orientation), envisioning a desired future (a fully diverse, inclusive, and equitable university), and identifying and prioritizing the necessary changes to realize that future (by revising orientation and other DEI practices). In response to research demonstrating the value of deliberation in affinity groups for empowering members of non-dominant groups to contribute to public deliberation (Abdullah et al., 2016), the class chose to offer participants the option of engaging in discussion with peers of a similar gender, race or ethnicity, sexual orientation, economic class, or physical ability. The course employed a similar process of reading prior research and deliberating over how to apply it to design the agenda and plans to capture participants' views in notes and a survey.

To prepare students for *active experimentation* with their ideas by holding the forums, the instructor trained students to facilitate and evaluate deliberation. At this stage, the instructor's role is to set performance standards and help learners to meet them by applying their newfound knowledge and skills effectively. The instructor assigned background readings on the art of facilitation and designed exercises for students to practice these techniques in class in a fishbowl (one group observed by other students) and in small groups. Students contributed, jigsaw-style, to a facilitators' guide filled with steps for dealing with difficult dynamics that often arise in discussions of DEI issues. The instructor also introduced readings and examples of evaluation criteria for high-quality deliberation, and supported students to draft a post-event survey for participants to assess the forums.

In the *active experimentation* stage, teams of two or three class members co-facilitated and took notes on a total of ten small-group forums, each an hour long and held via video conference. After the forums, the instructor coached students on how to apply their knowledge to achieve the project goals,

providing direction on how to analyze themes in the notes on participants' responses and quantitative responses to the post-forum evaluation survey. The instructor provided templates for the final report and presentation slides, and coordinated student teams to analyze, write, and present different sections of the report based on students' preferences. Jigsawing the report in this way provided another opportunity for students to engage in collaborative critical thinking and comparison of diverse perspectives.

Outcomes

Student self-evaluations gathered through university and departmental course evaluations, and the instructor's assessment of student learning, indicated that almost all students met the project's learning goals (which are stated above in the section on context and goals). In the students' self-evaluations, mean scores for how well they met each learning goal were all six or above on a scale of one ("no progress") to seven ("significant progress"). Students in the course also found the experiential learning methods valuable. Large majorities rated as "very effective" or "somewhat effective" the assigned readings (80 percent), live classes (90 percent), class activities and discussions (95 percent), online postings (85 percent) and the class project as a whole (85 percent) ($N=20$). When asked to discuss "why any learning methods were especially effective or ineffective," most students mentioned the project as especially useful. Students reported that "working together as a class helped me solidify understanding and ask questions"; "class sessions allowed me to put course concepts into action through live practices"; "the class project was most effective because we could put what we had learned into action while collaborating with each other"; "creating the dialogue and deliberation process required a lot of engagement with class materials, so I definitely feel like I learned a lot through the class project"; "the class project was definitely the most effective to me being able to see our learning and skills play out in a real life scenario"; and "it was nice to be able to participate in something that was rewarding as well as helping the school as a whole."

There was more evidence of student learning in the post-event online evaluation surveys completed by participants in the discussion forums. Participants rated the students' agenda and facilitation skills highly. Large majorities of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they "were able to explore diverse points of view" (88.5 percent), "learned enough to arrive at a well-informed opinion" (87.5 percent), "the facilitators led the discussion in an

impartial manner" (90 percent), "everyone's ideas got a respectful hearing, even if we didn't end up agreeing" (97.5 percent), that OML "will pay attention to the opinions expressed in our discussion today" (75 percent), and that "I feel more committed to creating a diverse, equitable, and inclusive [university] than I did before this forum" (83.5 percent) ($N=40$).

There were two main obstacles to student learning in the course. One was a handful of students' tendency to act as free riders on the work of the full class or of a team that facilitated a forum or wrote part of the report. The instructor held students accountable by assigning participation points to each individual online discussion posting as an incentive to read and contribute design ideas consistently; by requiring students to co-facilitate; and by requiring students to write drafts of the report in Google Docs that showed each team member's contributions to each version of the document. Another barrier was that some students feared facilitating a group discussion about potentially volatile DEI issues among a group of their peers. The instructor addressed these anxieties by developing an extensive facilitator guide with the class; offering multiple opportunities to practice facilitating in class throughout the course; giving constructive, individualized feedback on what student facilitators were doing well and could improve; employing co-facilitation, so no student had to moderate an entire forum; and developing a detailed agenda for the forums with the full class.

Implications and Action Plan

The literature suggests that higher education institutions can best promote progress toward DEI by taking actions consistent with their mission statements, practicing transparent and participatory governance, and continuously adapting programming and practices to relevant changes on campus and in the world (Barnett, 2020). This case suggests ways in which universities can promote student-led deliberation to accomplish each of these tasks, which are important for advancing DEI and preparing students to participate in democratic institutions (Carr & Thésée, 2017; Gurin-Sands et al., 2012).

The project suggested that student deliberation can generate valuable recommendations about how universities can *enact their missions*. As noted above, in the post-event evaluation survey participants said they felt that OML would take their recommendations seriously, enhancing institutional authenticity, and felt more personally committed to realizing DEI on campus. During the class's presentation of their

findings to OML staff and in post-event debriefings among the staff and the instructor, staff members said they appreciated receiving new insights, especially that students felt the best way to engage resistant peers was through the intergroup dialogue component of orientation, especially if trained students (rather than staff or faculty members) facilitated these discussions in smaller groups. Staff also felt they benefitted from recommendations that reinforced their goal of promoting a campus in which people of different cultures intermix often, while learning about and respecting each other's differences. Staff also took note of feedback that addressed structural barriers to DEI, such as the need for a more diverse campus community.

The project outcomes also suggest ways in which student-led deliberation on DEI could *improve institutional governance* by enhancing the transparency and accountability of DEI programs. The project provided a new opportunity for students to learn about *why* the institution introduced them to DEI issues using intergroup dialogue, and a new channel for student feedback on how to strengthen DEI in orientation and beyond. The deliberative skills and experiences that students in the course and their peers in the forums developed could serve them well in further discussions within student organizations, and with administration, about how to advance DEI on campus. Students found that holding some of these deliberations in affinity groups could add perspectives and recommendations that may not be raised in intergroup dialogues. For example, a Latinx-only forum paid special attention to transforming campus policing, while several female-only forums generated more recommendations about how to address gender bias on campus. In addition, because the course trained a group of students to facilitate discussion, and evaluation data confirmed that participants rated student facilitators highly, OML immediately recruited them to lead intergroup dialogues during orientation, and the Dean of Students approached the instructor for advice on how to consult students about pending reforms to the Campus Safety Department.

Finally, student recommendations, and the example of the project itself, helped OML to *adapt DEI programs and practices*. In particular, student feedback prompted OML to reframe the problem of engaging students in grappling with DEI issues on a deeper level after orientation. At the outset, OML saw this challenge as one of "getting reluctant students into the room" for additional dialogues led by staff. In contrast, students recommended training students and faculty members to bring these dialogues into student clubs and required courses across the curriculum, using

small-group methods in a variety of organizational and physical locations where students regularly associate and learn. This approach could help meet the challenge of bringing high-impact experiential learning to scale across the institution and integrating disparate efforts for DEI that have emerged in administrative practices, the academic curriculum, the co-curriculum, and assessment of student learning, so that they can become more than the sum of their siloed parts.

Conclusion

Institutions of higher learning must devote greater attention to issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion to create a stronger sense of belonging among students from non-dominant groups and to overcome polarization between groups in the wider culture. Experiential learning in the curriculum and co-curriculum is making valuable contributions to these goals. Campuses can build on successful intergroup dialogues, like those held during new student orientation, by engaging students in deliberation about how to improve DEI on campus. In formal coursework and co-curricular organizations and programs, well-designed deliberation can develop students' voices and ability to facilitate change, allowing student learning to inform institutional learning. Opportunities for deliberation can improve institutions' ability to enact their educational missions, strengthen governance by deepening accountability and transparency of DEI efforts, and generate new ideas for updating and integrating DEI programs and practices across campus. ■

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