



**Justice
Institute**
BRITISH COLUMBIA

LEARNING THAT TAKES YOU BEYOND

Identifying Dialogue Approaches to Support Equity and Reconciliation

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Researched and written by:

Dr. Lisa Richlen, Janelle Acquaah-Harrison and Angela Millar

**The Justice Institute of British Columbia
respectfully acknowledges the Traditional, unceded and Treaty
Territories of First Peoples its campuses are situated.**

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Introduction and Executive Summary

Facilitated group process dialogue (hereafter: GPD), is a methodology that uses the group, communities, and relationships to help participants learn more about how their personal and social identities impact others in their immediate communities and beyond. It is commonly employed in conflict zones or between groups with opposing identities (political, ideological, ethnic or otherwise) to enhance understanding, strengthen social bonds and reduce violent and intractable social and political violence. Generally, it consists of a guided conversation process that helps people from different backgrounds talk honestly about identity and inequity, learn from one another's lived experiences, and build understanding by engaging with curiosity, empathy, and openness, rather than debate. A relatively unstructured process (often paired with structured skills training), GPD helps participants manage ambiguity, withstand discomfort, and understand reality in more complex and nuanced ways. Research identifies that, following GPD program participation, individuals are more culturally responsive, better at navigating power and identity, and have stronger multicultural awareness. This, in turn, builds resilience, confidence, and self-awareness when individuals face ideological or personal challenges.

The Justice Institute of British Columbia (hereafter: JIBC) is a recognized leader in skills acquisition and practical training, which is essential for the public safety careers that we prepare our learners to enter. Our faculty and graduates are increasingly operating within a social reality that is complex, unpredictable and, at times, threatening to them personally and to others. Skills and protocols can assist in these situations but may not be sufficient when individuals are required to adapt quickly in the face of personal threat or high stress. Furthermore, the high-pressure environments where our graduates work may generate interpersonal and intrapersonal tension and conflict. While we can't always assist at the workplace, similar situations are likely to arise in classroom settings as they are often a microcosm of society at large. Our staff and faculty are essential models for how to respond in such situations and their participation in facilitated dialogue can strengthen their confidence and capacity to assist learners in acquiring the same competencies.

GPD can help JIBC to better advance its strategic commitments. JIBC's *Strategic Plan 2022-2027: For the Greater Good* (Justice Institute of British Columbia, 2022) supports faculty in embracing "the unique experiences, viewpoints, and identities of all members of our community" (p. 9) while also learning to effectively "navigate and influence change" (p. 8). GDP also directly addresses Indigenous ways of thinking, being, relating and doing by embodying the principles of interconnectivity, relatedness, and holism. GDP integration may further support JIBC's commitments to strengthening efforts toward Truth and Reconciliation through the navigation of thoughtful discourse. Actively working to Indigenize our institution ensures that our systems are relevant, responsive and receptive (LaFever, 2016). "It will not always be comfortable for any of us, yet we can push through and make the progress we all need" (Justice Institute of British Columbia's Engagement Protocols and Guidelines, p. 21).

We believe that GPD will also advance JIBC's EDI plan entitled *Empowering Every Voice 2025*. It aligns with the institutional mandates of diversity and inclusion (EDI) by developing "a culture that enables open conversation about equity, diversity and inclusion, and the identification and removal of individual and systemic biases" (Justice Institute of British Columbia, 2025, p. 13). Finally, GPD complements JIBC's *Living Indigenization: Engagement Protocols and Guidelines*, which emphasize centering multiple narratives and lived experience and "being truthful about your positionality [in order to] hold space [which is] respectful of the differences you discover" (p. 14) as a precursor for meaningful action. This will open "the potential for greater social justice impact beyond education and training" (p. 10). Indeed, GPD offers a strong complement to the high level skills training offered by JIBC's Centre for Conflict Resolution. Faculty and

staff who have participated in GPD will be better equipped to handle challenges in JIBC's increasingly diverse workplace, along with the dilemmas that our learners bring to the classroom.

The enclosed research report first describes GPD in detail. It then outlines ways in which GPD can enhance JIBC's strategic goals of fostering equity, diversity, and inclusion in classrooms and advancing Truth and Reconciliation. The subsequent section presents research-based findings which demonstrate the value of GPD in post-secondary education. We then discuss ways in which GPD can be implemented in practice, including strategies, techniques and structures used globally with a focus on North America. This section also includes specific content on Circle work and demonstrates ways in which GPD is similar to or different from Circles. Finally, we offer suggestions for actionable next steps at JIBC.

Ultimately, this initiative will engage senior leadership, EDI teams, faculty, staff, and learners; it will strengthening faculty capacity to manage classroom conflict, navigating and reducing identity-related conflict escalations while supporting JIBC's ability to deliver on its institutional commitments.

What is Group Process Dialogue?

Facilitated intergroup dialogue is defined by Maxwell et al. (2023) as a “co-facilitated learning endeavour” that seeks to build relationships across power and cultural differences present among two or more social identities. As such, it brings people together from different social identity groups such as ‘race,’ gender, class, or ability, to explore their shared and different experiences through intentional conversation. Intergroup dialogue encourages exploration of self-other relationships through interpersonal inquiry (Maxwell et al., 2023). It also seeks to enhance communication processes for intergroup encounter with diverse groups by appreciating difference, engaging self, critical self-reflection and advancing social justice advocacy (Maxwell et al., 2023; Nagda, 2006; White et al., 2019). Participants use storytelling and discussion of social issues to reflect on how identity and experience shape perspective, with an emphasis on empathy and shared learning rather than persuasion or agreement. It further centres power, privilege, and group inequalities with the aim of promoting social justice (Maxwell et al., 2023). Therefore, GPD focuses on understanding one's social positioning, building relationships, developing mutual understanding, and making meaning together as a precursor for engaging in meaningful and effective action.

Usually held over several sessions, GPDs are often co-facilitated by individuals who bring different social identities and viewpoints into the room, modelling genuine engagement across difference. The facilitators amplify the value of each parties' experience (Wilgus & Holmes, 2009) while helping the group to identify patterns, examine assumptions, and work constructively with emotion and conflict as it arises. Grounded in theories of social identity, critical pedagogy, and dialogue as a form of learning, intergroup dialogue supports participants in developing awareness, empathy, and the skills needed for constructive and meaningful communication and collaboration across difference.

Rationale for Group Process Dialogue and Alignment with JIBC Mandates

We live during politically charged and socially challenging times. Societies are becoming increasingly diverse, and, in part due to social media, considerably more polarized. Simultaneously, it seems that many of us are losing the art of talking across difference. Stress levels are high, a reality that many public servants encounter every day in their interactions with the general public. These challenges are reflected in the

classroom where instructors must also address disruptions brought about by AI, global pandemics, rapid social change, and political and financial uncertainty.

Many of us, staff, faculty and students alike, personally uncomfortable about the state of the world, may struggle with how to effectively address these issues when they arise in the workplace and classroom. Where we lack personal clarity, are ambivalent, feel personally threatened or challenged, and emotions run high, we can practice strategies of avoidance rather than direct engagement. This may perpetuate misunderstandings, assumptions, and a lack of clarity. This discomfort may discourage students and work teams from discussing contentious issues openly and honestly. Additionally, groups, institutions and, ultimately, societies, struggle to effectively and constructively address emerging social justice issues. Specific to JIBC, this can impede meaningful progress toward institutional commitments and compromise JIBC's ability to promote a just society across learning environments and for students engaged in careers in public safety. Achieving these commitments requires a multi-faceted approach to prepare staff and faculty to embrace and embody social transformation.

GPD responds directly to these challenges. It offers a structured yet flexible framework that aligns with restorative justice principles and Indigenous Circle-based traditions. Meaningful dialogue, in Indigenous contexts and within GPD, requires a relational space rather than rigid structure. This space enables groups to experience difficult emotions, identity-based tensions, and divergent worldviews with acceptance and shared accountability. Unlike Western teaching environments that often leave instructors feeling untethered, GPD creates processes that are inclusive of all voices, supports deep listening, and encourages participants to co-create understanding. Thus, participants' ability to remain present in discomfort and relative lack of structure, and to transform tension into learning rather than avoidance or escalation is enhanced. Both GPD and Indigenous ways of being in community centre collective reflection, relational accountability, and the inclusion of all voices to guide decision-making and conflict resolution (Battiste, 2013). Incorporating such methods at JIBC can enrich and deepen discussions about JIBC's commitments to EDI and Truth and Reconciliation.

The JIBC Strategic Plan emphasizes the need for resilience in a complex and uncertain world, particularly through the ability to engage with vulnerability, navigate change, and work with diverse identities and perspectives. GPD prepares individuals to meet learners and colleagues in challenging moments, respond to discomfort with curiosity rather than avoidance, and hold space for diverse experiences to be voiced and valued. By building skill and confidence in this area, GPD training supports institutional commitments pertaining to cultural responsiveness, psychological safety, and creating a workplace where people feel they belong, are treated without bias, and are equipped to influence change.

JIBC's Empowering Every Voice: Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Plan (JIBC, 2025) identifies a clear need for professional development that helps staff and faculty to engage with diverse learners, embed inclusive pedagogies, and support open conversation about bias and systemic inequities. Its focus on belonging, recognition of diverse identities, and reducing bias echoes the core purpose of dialogic practice. The plan's emphasis on building a culture of open conversation around equity and systemic bias speaks directly to the kind of dialogic spaces GPD is designed to create, because such processes strengthen educators' capacities to guide discussions that surface identity, perspective, and lived experience. The plan also outlines numerous actions, including removing systemic barriers, naturalizing different ways of knowing and learning, and cultivating environments where all employees feel valued and supported. By instilling in participants a desire to engage in socially controversial issues and creation of enhanced relationships across difference, GPD lays an effective groundwork for advancing these important aims.

Very strong alignment also emerges in JIBC's commitment to Truth and Reconciliation through its *Living Indigenization: 2021-2027* (Justice Institute of British Columbia, 2021) plan. The commitments emphasize

relationality, collective responsibility, identity exploration, and the ongoing practice of working together across difference. Meaningful reconciliation can emerge where dialogue addresses positionality, self-reflection, and the need to understand one's own story. Indigenization also seeks to honour multiple worldviews, highlights tensions that naturally arise in intercultural spaces, and enhances the building of resilience around these tensions. GPD's emphasis on personal narratives, honest communication, and relationship-building across difference mirrors the values and practices central to Indigenization. GPD's structured approach helps participants to navigate such tensions with empathy, acceptance, and accountability. This mirrors Indigenous pedagogical principles emphasizing reciprocity through honouring one's thoughts (LaFever, 2016), shared responsibility, acknowledgement of the value of individual contributions, and the recognition that each person's contribution is necessary to the vitality of the whole. These principles support the exploration of personal interests leading to more collaborative goal achievement (LaFever 2016) and promote an environment that prioritizes synergistic outcomes (LaFever, 2016).

Further, GPD complements the skills training JIBC presently provides by enhancing competencies for engaging in difficult conversations. GPD is fundamentally about relationships and collective meaning-making. Across all institutional commitments, there is a shared aspiration: to create spaces where honest, respectful, and sometimes uncomfortable dialogue can occur, where identity and lived experience can be acknowledged rather than avoided, and where individual and institutional transformation can unfold. Incorporating GPD into faculty and staff development equips the institution to live these commitments more fully and consistently in daily practice. This type of intervention goes beyond pedagogical enrichment, rather it is a strategic, meaningful, and deeply aligned with JIBC's commitment to bringing about a more socially just campus and society.

Research-Based Findings about Group Process Dialogue

Research findings continually reinforce the notable impact of GPD in contentious environments, providing empirical support for its application and practice. Outcomes demonstrate that recipients of GPD training may more effectively access intuitive knowledge which enhances communication skills and increases awareness of complex emotions and relational power dynamics. Findings indicate that GPD supports the development of a dialogic mindset allowing participants to integrate intuitive and skills-based knowledge when navigating polarizing discussions (Shinew, 2023). Studies also demonstrate that GPD improves communication competencies including perspective-taking, critical social awareness and identity development contributing to more effective dialogue (Frantell et al., 2019). This occurs where personal experiences are appropriately integrated and course frameworks are maintained (Howard & Schmidt, 2023). GPD also promotes recognition of escalated emotions such as resistance and denial through conversational markers (Frantell et al., 2018; Hopkins & Domingue, 2015). Faculty trained in GPD are rated by learners as more culturally responsive and effective (Howard & Schmidt, 2023) with longitudinal evidence demonstrating an increased ability to navigate difficult classroom incidents involving power and identity (Howard & Schmidt, 2023). Likewise, trained facilitators acquire multicultural awareness, critical consciousness and allyship knowledge through their participation in the dialogic process (White et al., 2019).

Structural Inequalities Across Social Groups

GPD, ideally, requires participants to engage in self-reflection, identity development and exploration of positionality within power structures (Frantell et al., 2019). This lays the groundwork for participants to then identify points of contention and promote learning through awareness of the impact of power differentials among diverse identities. Learning to be an ally also requires reflection on power differentials

as this increases critical self-awareness, acknowledgement of power structures and identifying individual motivation for allyship (Frantell, 2019). Similarly, co-facilitation between two individuals who have different identities model how they navigate power dynamics in a natural environment (Quaye & Johnson, 2016). Participants are encouraged to adopt a dialogic orientation, learn from others, develop a critical consciousness and display leadership in the classroom and beyond (Shinew, 2023; White et al., 2019). Generally, the classroom is a microcosm of society; therefore, it reflects and refracts entrenched social structures whereby socially dominant groups may experience discomfort due to their power. As such, GPD advances understanding of the intersections between power, privilege and conflict between individuals who hold different group-based identities.

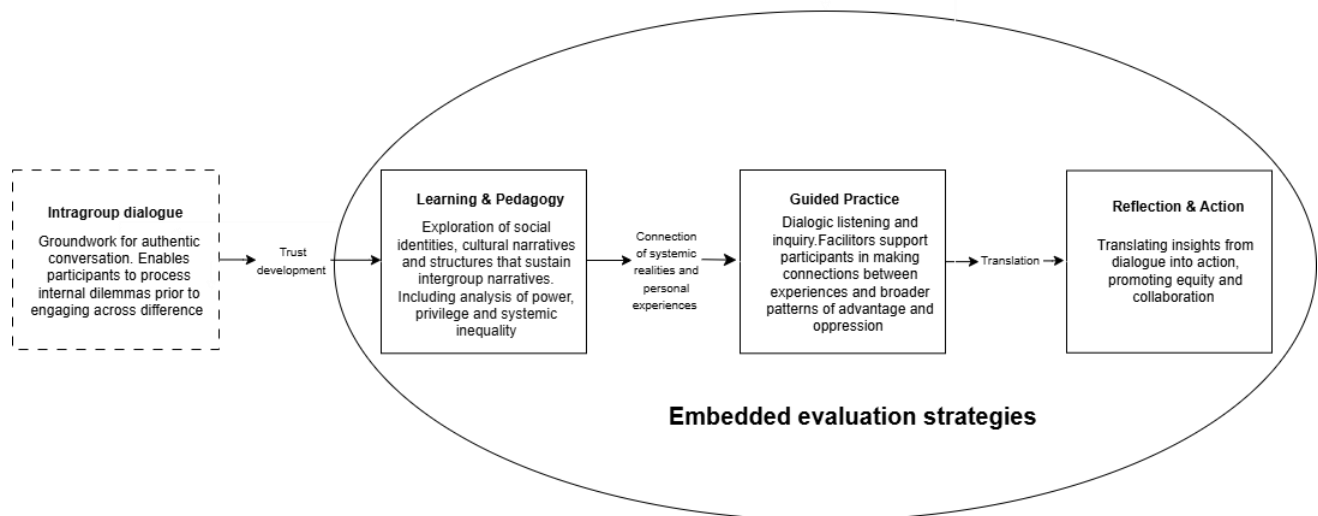
Facilitators play a crucial role in transforming conflictive discussions into constructive dialogue through preparation, modelling effective communication and engaging in reflective practices. The group's vulnerability, cohesion and capacity for expression are determined by facilitator readiness (Frantell et al., 2018). Prior to engaging in GPD, facilitators must engage in critical self-awareness and develop knowledge of self and others to increase competencies for understanding diverse perspectives within the group (Arieli & Friedman, 2019; Howard & Schmidt, 2023). In doing so, critical self-awareness can help to mitigate the tensions facilitators face when balancing between an authoritative and co-participatory stance (Quaye & Johnson, 2016). Facilitators also model collaboration, shared power and relationship navigation particularly through co-facilitation. Zúñiga (2003) describes facilitators as active co-learners rather than neutral moderators, reframing “fails” as a learning opportunity for all parties (Shinew, 2023). Expert facilitators embody both a dialogic orientation (a way of being) and group management skills (way of doing) demonstrating identity work and technical practice (Shinew, 2023). Together, this immersive learning encourages participants to meaningfully engage in dialogue and group processes.

Models of Implementation

Implementation models tend to be structured and staged and rely heavily on dialogue (Frantell et al., 2019; Zúñiga, 2003). This process builds trust, deepens understanding and moves participants toward collaborative action. The multi-stage process includes (roughly in this order) establishing norms, exploring commonalities and differences, dialoguing about issues of conflict and navigating shared futures through coalition building and action planning (Quaye, & Johnson 2016; White et al., 2019). Ben David et al. (2017) recommend intragroup dialogue as a preparatory step that enables participants to process internal dilemmas while sharpening group identity prior to engaging across difference. During the first stage, which is focused on forming relationships and establishing group norms, facilitators guide participants in creating shared agreements that ensure psychological safety and acceptance across difference. This lays the groundwork for authentic conversation with the aim of moving the group from cautious politeness to genuine engagement. As trust develops, the dialogue moves into exploring social identities and lived experiences such as those related to ‘race,’ gender, class or ability. These conversations illuminate how these social identifications shape perspectives, interactions and social structures. Accordingly, this stage tends to surface privilege, oppression, and marginalization as it connects systemic realities to personal stories. The next phase involves analysing power, privilege, and systemic inequality; groups examine the social structures and cultural narratives that sustain intergroup tensions. Throughout this process, facilitators encourage dialogic listening and inquiry rather than debate, helping participants to make connections between their experiences and broader patterns of advantage and oppression. The final stage focuses on translating insights gleaned from the dialogue into action thus promoting equity and collaboration in their communities, institutions, and beyond. This may include individual commitments, partnerships, or collaborative projects. Finally, evaluation must be embedded to measure both faculty and learner outcomes (see Figure 1a).

Figure 1a

Stages of GPD Implementation Models

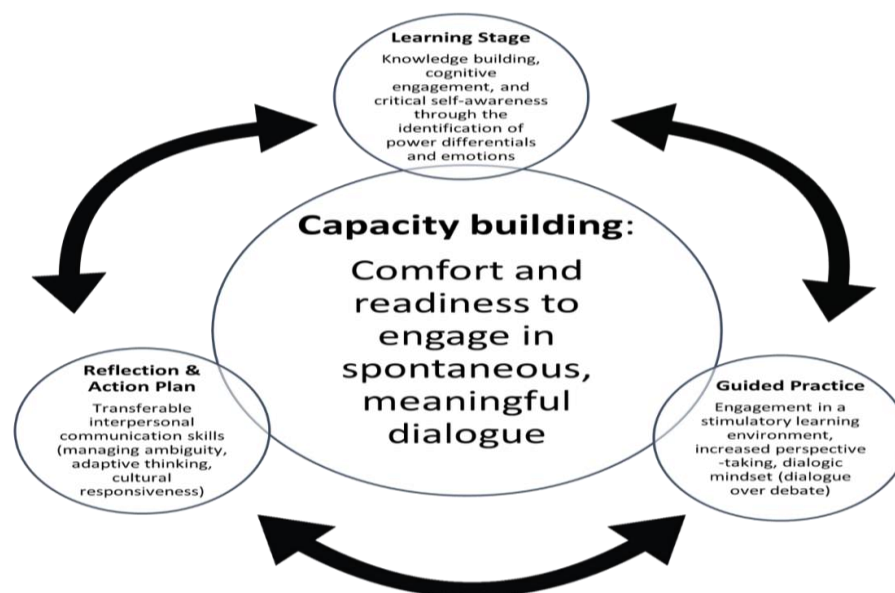


Note: Figure 1a presents the stages within GPD models, displaying trust as the cornerstone for active engagement. Intragroup dialogue is an encouraged preliminary step for greater relational depth. Participants develop trust as the dialogue moves sequentially through the learning, guided practice and reflection phases. Each phase contains evaluation strategies that support participants and facilitators to identify transformation and insights throughout the process.

This progression - from relationship building to action - reflects the understanding that meaningful dialogue about social difference requires emotional readiness and cognitive engagement. Each phase builds participants' capacity to withstand discomfort, manage ambiguity, listen across difference and create new ways of relating that extend beyond the dialogue space. It supports constructive engagement and increased capacity for diverse perspectives in conflict (Howard & Schmidt, 2023) and, accordingly, participation in the process through dialogue rather than debate (Zuniga, 2003). This structured, relational model, further, helps participants to navigate, identity, power-differentials and emotions during difficult dialogues (White et al., 2019). These actionable steps are applicable to individuals, groups and institutional contexts (Shinew, 2023; Zuniga, 2003). GPD models provide a stimulating participant learning environment while encouraging facilitator development (White et al., 2019). As models share an emphasis on sequencing, reflection, and progressive engagement, this suggests that best practices are both replicable and adaptable (see Figure 1b).

Figure 1b

Aptitude Development within Implementation Models



Note: Figure 1b illustrates the related aptitudes and skills within each stage presented in Figure 1a.

The research consistently highlights an emphasis on facilitator support as essential to effective GPD. Facilitators benefit from supervision, mentorship, and peer consultation to navigate critical incidents, build confidence, and manage self-doubt (Frantell et al., 2018; White et al., 2019). Marginalized facilitators often carry disproportionate emotional and labour burdens, especially when their lived experiences intersect with dialogue topics, making intentional institutional recognition and support crucial for sustaining their effectiveness (Frantell et al., 2018; Shinew, 2023). Beyond formal supervision, professional networks and communities of practice further promote reflection, resilience, and continuous learning. Collectively, these findings show that GPD's success depends as much on sustained facilitator support as on the dialogue process itself.

Facilitated Dialogue in Practice

Across North America, a wide range of universities, community organizations, and justice-oriented groups are implementing structured dialogue processes to help people navigate identity, conflict, and social division. These interventions are reaching students, educators, frontline practitioners, community members, and groups working across ideological or cultural difference. While each model varies in purpose and structure, they share a commitment to strengthening relational capacity, building understanding across difference and supporting communities in responding to complex social challenges. Most university-based approaches focus on classroom learning, faculty development and engagement across the campus community. They draw heavily on social identity education, experiential learning, and structured dialogue methods. Community organizations and restorative justice programs apply similar principles in settings such as schools, neighbourhoods, charities, and social-change movements. In all cases, practitioners aim to foster trust, encourage critical reflection, and help groups work through tension in ways that strengthen relationships rather than strain them. Research across these contexts consistently demonstrates that such approaches increase cultural responsiveness, reduce polarization, and build participants' capacity for dialogue, conflict navigation, and collaboration. These interventions demonstrate that meaningful dialogue requires more than communication skills alone. It depends on

creating the conditions — relational, emotional, cultural, and structural — that support participants in engaging difference with openness, sensitivity, and accountability.

University-Based Programs

Dialogue-based interventions across North American campuses vary in form, but many trace their lineage to the Program on Intergroup Relations (IGR) at the University of Michigan. Established in 2006, IGR was the first higher education initiative of its kind and remains one of the most extensively studied and replicated dialogue programs in the field (Brown, 2013). Its signature contribution—the four-stage intergroup dialogue model—combines social justice education with experiential learning to help participants understand identity, power, and inequality through sustained, facilitated interaction (Zúñiga et al., 2007). It integrates three core educational goals: consciousness raising, building relationships among conflicting parties, and strengthening individual capacities to promote social justice (Zúñiga et al., 2007). What distinguishes the Michigan model is its intentional sequencing. Participants begin by developing the relationships and communication foundations needed for honest conversation. The process then moves into a structured examination of social identity and lived experience before engaging the group in deeper, and often more challenging, conversations about conflict, inequity, and systemic patterns. The final phase emphasizes integrating insights through reflection, skill practice, and action-oriented commitments. The model is implemented with varying frameworks depending on the target end-users, service-provider and community needs.

The strength of this structure lies not only in its content but in its evidence base. Michigan’s program has been evaluated through large-scale, multi-university research studies that document gains in empathy, intergroup communication skills, and motivation for collaboration among students who complete the dialogue process (Zúñiga, 2007). The program’s dual academic–student affairs structure, where courses, workshops, and research initiatives are coordinated across departments, has also contributed to its national reach. Since 2006, more than 100 institutions have participated in the Intergroup Dialogue National Institute, adopting or adapting the four-stage model in ways that align with their own curricular and organizational priorities.¹

Other universities implement variations of the Michigan approach; they maintain its developmental logic while tailoring delivery to local needs. At Ohio State University, for example, their model informs student residence-based facilitated dialogues, undergraduate workshops on civil discourse, and teaching endorsement programs that help instructors address contentious issues in the classroom.² Mount Holyoke University has built a similar staged approach into both credit-bearing courses and staff development workshops, using the framework to support conversations about ‘race,’ social identity, and community dynamics.³ The University of Washington also incorporates a version of the four-stage model in its intergroup dialogue courses, contributing to the broader multi-university research that has documented measurable impacts in student communication skills, critical awareness, and motivation for collaboration (Gurin, Nagda, & Zúñiga, 2013). In each case, institutions retain a core commitment to progress from relationship-building, to identity exploration, to engagement with conflict and ultimately to reflection and application. What varies is how these phases are integrated, whether through coursework, co-curricular dialogue programs, professional development for faculty and staff, or campus-wide initiatives aimed at strengthening communication across difference (Howard & Schmidt, 2023).

¹ See: Program on Intergroup Relations and the University of Michigan <https://igr.umich.edu/>

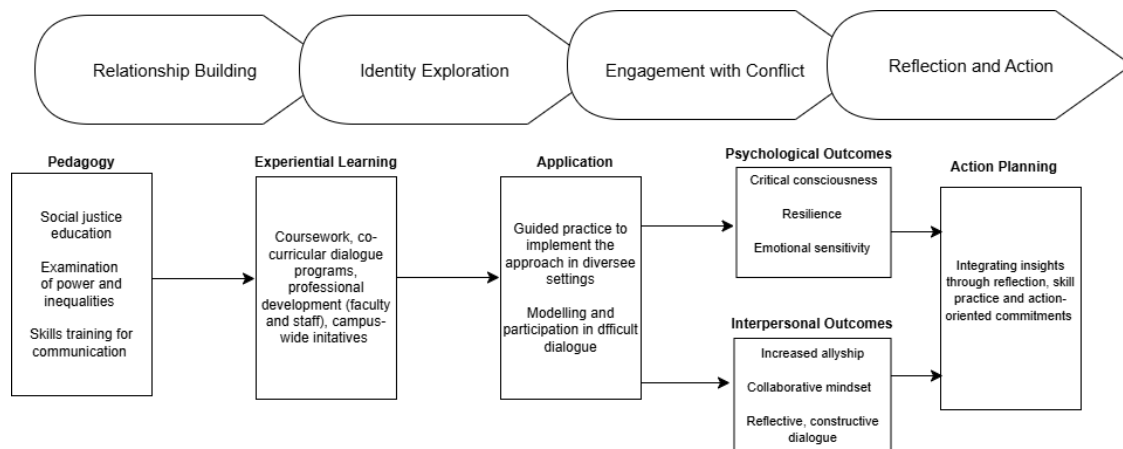
² See: Center for Ethics and Human Values, The Ohio State University <https://cehv.osu.edu/civil-discourse-citizenship-0/teaching-endorsement-ethical-disagreement-and-civil-discourse>

³ See: Mount Holyoke College <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/student-experience/community-and-belonging/social-justice/social-justice-education-intergroup-dialogue>

Taken together, these models reflect a shared understanding that dialogue requires intentional preparation, guided practice, and structured opportunities to reflect on experience. Even as institutions implement the approach in diverse settings, the influence of the Michigan model is evident in the emphasis on developmental progression, attention to identity and power, and the use of facilitation as a central element of learning. This consistency across institutions highlights the adaptability of the staged approach and its relevance for contexts seeking to deepen capacity for reflective, constructive dialogue.

Figure 2

Sequential stages in Intergroup Dialogue



Note: Overview of a phasic model influenced by the University of Michigan’s Program of Intergroup Relations.¹ Applications of the model emphasize the core commitments of intergroup dialogue: relationship building, identity exploration, engagement with conflict and reflection. These commitments are further represented through pedagogy and education, experiential learning, and action planning.

Organizational and Community-Based

Organizations may use different methods, yet their shared structural elements support the integration of facilitated dialogue with training in identity navigation, intergroup collaboration, and facilitation skills. Organizational dialogical models highlight the role of pedagogy and critical identity awareness, fostering shared goals in conflict resolution and guiding actionable steps to advance acceptance, inclusion and collaboration.

The Ottawa Dialogue, a university-based organization at the University of Ottawa, Canada, uses dialogic approaches to foster critical awareness and explore shared goals which are then transformed into actionable steps. Using a “quiet processes,” the organization applies structured, relationship-focused intergroup dialogue to address differences among groups in conflict locally, nationally, and internationally. This framework supports capacity building for collective impact and promotes shared futures.⁴ It also incorporates research methodologies such as conflict mapping, context analysis, scholarly work, and field intervention reports to identify emerging themes in dialogue and translate them into policy-relevant research, informed decision making, and public discourse.⁴

⁴ See: Ottawa Dialogue <https://ottawadialogue.ca/what-we-do/>

Essential Partners, a non-profit organization based in Boston, USA, provides facilitation, coaching and consultation to guide dialogue within communities and organizations.⁵ Their approach, entitled Reflective Structure Dialogue (RSD), is a research-based, flexible and validated framework for systemic change.⁶ The RSD framework underpins Essential Partners' methodology, drawing on multidisciplinary approaches including family therapy, systems theory and narrative practices to address polarized dynamics. It also applies a structured process to cultivate healthy intergroup dynamics through context-specific design, knowledge acquisition related to the RSD framework, and experiential learning.⁵ Community applications are further strengthened through coaching, policy guidance and resource availability, such as the Race in America Dialogue Guide to encourage sustainable capacity for constructive dialogue.⁶

Restorative Justice and Circles Processes

Description

Community justice initiatives, based on the traditions of Indigenous groups in Canada, apply a methodology called restorative circles. The circle process, as described by Pranis (2005), utilizes a structured yet flexible format that encourages reflection, storytelling, and collective meaning-making. Pranis (2005) describes the dialogue process as relational and rooted in traditions of community peace-making. It begins with a brief ceremony or reflection that sets the tone and invites participants to name shared values and guiding principles, such as speaking and listening from the heart. Dialogue then unfolds in rounds using a talking piece so that each person can speak without interruption and all voices are heard. Through these rounds they share stories, reflect, and build understanding which engenders a rhythm that supports presence and slows reactive communication (Pranis, 2005). Participants co-create guiding values such as honesty, curiosity, and courage, which shape their speaking and listening. The circle closes with a final round where participants offer reflections or gratitude and where they comment on what they are taking with them, reinforcing trust and continuity. Grounded in respect, honesty, and trust, the circle process creates a space where genuine connection and collective insight can emerge.

Circles are particularly relevant in contexts of social and political conflict and inequity as they are democratic and non-hierarchical (Pranis, 2005). By creating a space where each participant has equal access to voice and influence, circles naturally challenge systems of oppression and make visible the relational dynamics that can either reinforce or disrupt inequity. Their emphasis on shared values and collective purpose cultivates a sense of belonging and highlights the human interests at the heart of social change and justice work (Brown & Di Lallo, 2020). In this way, circles become not only a dialogic method but also a practice of community-building and liberation, offering participants a way to engage complex issues without reinforcing the systems they seek to transform (Pranis, 2005; Brown & Di Lallo, 2020).

In practice, circles can serve different functions depending on context. In classroom settings, they may help participants reflect on identity, surface underlying tensions, or build community before engaging in difficult conversations. In organizational or community settings, circles can support teams working through conflict, processing change, or aligning around shared commitments. Across all applications, the structure of the circle holds space for vulnerability and emotional honesty, while the shared values provide support when conversations become challenging (Brown & Di Lallo, 2020). The predictability of the process; opening, rounds of dialogue, closing, helps groups stay grounded and reduces the likelihood of escalation.

⁵ See: Participedia <https://participedia.net/Organization/250>

⁶ See: Essential Partners <https://whatisessential.org/>

Restorative Justice in Canada

True Dialogue Restorative Justice Centre, based in Alberta, Canada, applies dialogic methods through a restorative, culturally informed and critically conscious framework to support Indigenous, Black and other racialized communities. The organization incorporates strategies aligned with the Alberta Indigenous Restorative Justice in Action mandates and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. They offer training, facilitator development and resources that support a structured, repeatable and restorative dialogue model. The model is guided by principles of acknowledgment, accountability, repair and reintegration, as well as experiential components such as safe meetings between harmed individuals, accountable parties and caregivers. Through this phasic model, learning, experience and actionable steps are incorporated to promote and build practitioner capacity, develop facilitator networks and support community resilience and relational repair.⁷

Similarly, Community Justice Initiatives based in British Columbia implement restorative dialogic models across communities, offering training and resources for educators and students. Through participation in restorative dialogue circles within schools and community contexts, participants address community development, disciplinary processes and strategies to overcome barriers in school culture. These activities foster cultural safety, accountability and healing among youth while encouraging participants to take actionable steps to promote restorative principles within their communities.⁸

GPD and Circles Work

Restorative justice methodologies, primary among them circles, offers a relational framework that closely aligns with the goals of GPD. Both emphasize self-knowledge and positionality, relational learning and emotional honesty. They centre human connection, mutual understanding, and accountability through conversation rather than adversarial exchange (Barkaskas & Gladwin, 2021). Participants are invited to tell their stories, listen deeply and empathically and accept the other non-judgementally to repair or strengthen relationships and build understanding across difference (Mandamin, 2025). Both approaches emphasize that dialogue can be transformative when participants engage their whole selves, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually, in the process. While healing circles aim to restore balance and harmony in communities affected by harm, GPD seeks to build awareness, trust, and social justice across social identities. In both, facilitators or circle keepers, hold space for vulnerability, reflection and resilience in the face of discomfort, guiding groups toward relational accountability and understanding. Through a recognition of shared humanity, these methodologies serve as pathways to transformational relationship building and, as a result, collective healing.

Bringing restorative principles and circle processes into the broader group dialogue model strengthens capacity to engage with complexity in a relational and culturally sensitive way. Restorative approaches focus on shared humanity and emphasize accountability without blame, while circles offer a practical method for facilitating the deeper listening and reflection that GPD requires. Together, they provide instructors, staff, and students with accessible tools for navigating identity-based tension, encouraging thoughtful engagement, and building community resilience. This integration also aligns with JIBC commitments to equity and reconciliation by modelling ways of relating that honour diverse experiences, acknowledge historical and contemporary harms, and cultivate practices of care and responsibility within learning environments.

⁷ See: True Dialogue <https://www.truedialogue.ca/mandate>

⁸ See: Community Justice Initiatives Association <https://cjibc.org/programs/>

Best Practices

- Develop programs that begin with intragroup caucuses to strengthen group-based identities and surface identity narratives and dilemmas, followed by structured intergroup dialogues.
- Develop a facilitator training stream that includes instruction in pedagogy, group dynamics, trauma-informed practice, and structured peer support.
- Integrate dialogue into natural spaces of encounter such as department meetings, curriculum planning, and classrooms to normalize ongoing engagement.
- Provide targeted support for facilitators from marginalized groups, recognizing the disproportionate labour they often carry in advancing equity and reconciliation.
- Embed evaluation by tracking faculty self-assessments, student perceptions of cultural responsiveness, and evidence of key communication processes.

Next Steps

- Consult with the Office of Indigenization regarding integration and alignment with Indigenous practices.
- Discuss the findings of this research with key parties at JIBC such as the EDI committee.
- Develop a pilot for Centre for Conflict Resolution faculty.
- Collaborate with Centre for Teaching Learning and Innovation to conduct a pilot for staff and/or faculty more broadly.

Conclusion

Group process dialogue (GPD) provides a structured yet adaptable, experiential approach for transforming contentious classroom discussions and building relationships across difference. It equips faculty and students with the competencies to navigate challenging topics by encouraging mutual understanding and enhancing communication skills training while advancing social justice. GPD engages participants and facilitators alike, promoting awareness of self and others in varying contexts. The approach aligns with restorative justice principles and Indigenous circle practices, emphasizing relational, inclusive and supportive dialogue that transforms tension into a learning opportunity. The implementation of GPD aligns with JIBC's strategic EDI and Living Indigenization goals, actively engaging in ways of knowing, fostering psychological safety, valuing personal narratives and histories while addressing biases and systemic barriers. GPD has strong empirical support and has been shown to be effective in both university and community settings, emphasizing the development of critical awareness, intergroup collaboration and shared future planning. Collectively, GPD equips participants to cultivate inclusive environments, strengthen meaningful engagement and model culturally responsive practices that champion equity and collaboration in the classroom and beyond.

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Appendix

This appendix provides additional details about organizations and academic institutions within the grey literature portion of the report. Supplementary information includes organizational background, key program statistics, service locations and implementation models.

Table

Intergroup Dialogue and Related Program Summary

Organization	Founded	Location	Mission/ Goals	Target Groups	Implementation Models	Program Statistics	Recognition & Partnerships
Intergroup Relations Program (IGR), University of Michigan ¹	2006	Michigan, USA	Promote and disseminate the IGR's vision and practices through research, workshops and dialogue	Faculty and staff	8-to-10-week structured sessions; experiential opportunities such as skill labs and facilitated dialogue, consolidation through reflection practices and further support with training application	110 institutions trained across the U.S. and Canada; over 1400 students per term within the university	Recognized by the Clinton Administration's Initiative on Race, the U.S. Department of Education, and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences
Center of Human Ethics and Values (CEHV), including the Ethical Disagreement and Civil Discourse teaching endorsement program (EDCD), The Ohio State University ²	2016	Ohio, USA	Improve mutual understanding, build civic trust, and support shared problem-solving to promote respectful debate and discussion	Workshops are available to undergraduate students EDCD training is open to faculty, postdocs, and graduate students	EDCD offers a teaching endorsement program that includes four monthly sessions and the "The 4Cs of Virtues of Civil Discourse," online course emphasizing knowledge acquisition, skill-building and experiential learning. Student workshops: <i>Donuts & Dialogue</i> dorm dialogues around contentious, student-led topics	37 instructors and student program directors from the OSU colleges (EDCD) 2023-24, CEHV has hosted over 20 tailored workshops for students	The EDCD program is in partnership with the OSU Drake Institute for Teaching and Learning
Intergroup Dialogue Center, Mount	2023	Massachusetts, USA	Part of MHU's social justice initiatives and led by Student Life &	Students, faculty and staff	Workshops and credit-based curricular support courses (CUSP) for	Intergroup Dialogue Symposium (2023) hosted 175	Led by Student Life & Academic Affairs Department

Holyoke University ³			Academic Affairs. Aims to build dialogic capacity, engage the community in dialogue and develop meaning for collaborative action		learning IGD history, engaging in discussion and demonstrations of facilitated conversations	participants from 25 other national academic institutions Two-day workshop (2023) received 37 faculty and student life staff members (Feuerstein, 2024)	
True Dialogue Restorative Justice Centre	N/A	Alberta, Canada	Non-profit focused on restorative justice facilitation to foster community resilience	Indigenous, Black and other racialized youth and adults, restorative justice practitioners, social workers, community organizations, formal authorities, victims and offenders	Culturally safe restorative practices and curricula addressing systemic inequities, through training, developing facilitator networks, and providing support	Builds practitioner capacity through training programs; creates meetings between harmed individuals, those responsible and their supports	Key project: Alberta Indigenous Restorative Justice in Action (AIRJA) Initiative aligns with UNDRIP and TRC
Ottawa Dialogue	2009	Ontario, Canada	University-based organization that facilitates sustained dialogue, conflict prevention and mitigation, advancements in research and best practices	Parties in conflict, including organizations, governments, decision-makers, and communities	Workshops; policy-relevant research influencing the application of dialogue and mediation	Global reach supporting parties in building capacity to engage in meaningful dialogue and generate solutions accepted by stakeholders	Recognized for research-informed dialogic interventions
Community Justice Initiatives Association	1974	British Columbia, Canada	Advances restorative justice, focusing on healing, relationship restoration and compassionate alternatives to punitive approaches	Educators, students, schools, victims and offenders (primarily youth) and community members	Restorative Action Program addressing discipline and bullying in schools; training and community programming	CJI provides resources such as the Youth Black Book and community-based justice programming	Established restorative justice impact with over 30 years of delivering programs

Essential Partners	1989	Boston, USA	Trains individuals and organizations in increasing relational capacity in their communities and in democratic resolution	Individuals, workplaces, schools NGOs, faith-based communities, academic institutions and organizations	Training, facilitation, coaching and consultation and long-term collaboration Applies Reflective Structured Dialogue (RSD) methodology, a flexible, scalable research-based framework for systemic change. Drawing from family therapy, mediation, systems theory, narrative practices and neurobiology	Partnerships with over 350 college campuses, 140 workplaces and organizations, 400 local communities and 100 secondary schools	Recognized for diverse applications across sectors, long-term relational and systemic impact, and peer-reviewed support for RSD methodology
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Note: Full organizational references are provided in the reference list.

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