Facilitating Critical Information Literacy
Using Intergroup Dialogue to Engage with the Framework

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Land Acknowledgement

Colgate University and the town of Hamilton, New York, are built upon the ancestral lands of the Onyota’a:ki (Oneida) of the Hodínöhso:ni’. This land was acquired through forced cession in the “Treaty” of Fort Schuyler in 1788, under the guise of “protecting” Oneida lands from greedy land speculators.1 The state of New York as well as the United States of America owe a debt to the Onyota’a:ki, who were critical allies in the Revolutionary War. As a settler on this land and descendant of immigrants, I cannot begin to speak about equity or inclusion without recognizing the painful history of violence, dispossession, and betrayal, as well as honoring the modern Indigenous experiences of the Oneida Indian Nation of New York.

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Introduction

In my thirteen years at Colgate University, a predominantly white institution, I’ve been involved in university-wide diversity efforts, initially stemming from my experiences as a queer, trans, and disabled librarian, but also growing to focus more heavily on race as I became more aware of my own whiteness. In the fall of 2014, over 300 students staged a one-hundred-hour sit-in at the admissions office to draw attention to the unaddressed inequities and racism at Colgate, culminating in a twenty-one-point action plan. The cry of “Can you hear us now?” resonated strongly with me, as it echoed my first Intergroup Dialogue (IGD) experience.

At Colgate, I was part of the second cohort of faculty and staff to participate in a two-day IGD workshop and dialogue around controversial issues in May 2014. Prior to this experience, I had stood in solidarity with my BIPOC colleagues as they shared their experiences with racism and sexism on campus. I had heard these stories. I had expressed my sympathies. I had silently sworn to enact change on this campus so these injustices wouldn’t continue (though, “somehow,” they just kept happening). I worked to incorporate social justice into my librarianship and collaborated with colleagues on diversity training sessions and classes.

It wasn’t until I was in a room with thirty-four other faculty and staff—people that I worked with every day, people that I admired and even loved as friends—experiencing IGD for two days straight that I actually HEARD the stories and the pain of my BIPOC colleagues. I felt it all, deep inside of my core being. I understood. That day, I swore out loud that I’d do everything possible to enact real change, and I’ve since dedicated myself to doing the work of dismantling racism and addressing social justice through my personal life and my library work. I hope you will find something in this chapter to inspire you in your own work toward equitable and inclusive pedagogies.

What is Intergroup Dialogue?

Intergroup Dialogue (IGD) is a democratic social justice education process that involves facilitated dialogues around controversial issues with a diverse group of people over a sustained length of time. Developed at the University of Michigan, IGD has been grown, tested, evaluated, and used in a variety of forums to help often opposing groups come to a mutual understanding.

Ione Damasco has spoken about and written extensively on using IGD in a professional development setting. In a chapter in the book Libraries Promoting Reflective Dialogue in a Time of Political Polarization, Damasco covered the basics of the IGD process for professional development, so I will speak only briefly about its design.
here. At the end of this chapter, I include several resources for getting started in doing your own research around IGD (see appendix).

IGD is split into four stages:

- Stage 1: group beginnings (forming and building relationships)
- Stage 2: exploring differences and commonalities of experience
- Stage 3: exploring and discussing hot topics
- Stage 4: action planning and building alliances

During a sustained dialogue, the group may move between various stages, often circling back or repeating stages. The facilitator is there to guide the participants through a structured dialogue, but they are not the teachers or the experts.

It's important to emphasize that IGD is a process deliberately focused on sustained dialogues. While you can use aspects and exercises from IGD to build relationships or explore differences in a one-shot or even a reference interaction, it isn't a true IGD experience without the long-term commitment to dialogue. Sarah Gilchrist speaks about using the IGD exercise Ground Rules to initially engage students with the learning environment of a semester-long information literacy course. IGD exercises and dialogue can be used for one-time purposes to promote emotional and intellectual engagement, but optimally IGD should be done over several class periods or in an extended (two-to-four-hour) workshop.

Background

It may seem that I’m coming at this with the passion of a convert, and perhaps I am. Coinciding with my first IGD experience and the Colgate student protest of 2014, ACRL was heading toward releasing the final version of the new Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education. While the reception of the emerging Framework was chilly at best in our local conversations, I found many parallels between the equity and inclusion library work I wanted to do, the critical-dialogic approach I was learning from IGD, and the concepts presented by the Framework.

Starting with the fall of 2015, a two-and-a-half-hour IGD experience was incorporated into the first-year orientation program. I’ve been a frequent facilitator, leading new students in discussions of race, gender, sexuality, and class. The students are introduced to the concepts of dialogue versus debate versus discussion, set ground rules, and work through some IGD exercises to introduce them to having critical conversations at Colgate. Additionally, one-hour conversations are held throughout the academic year where students, faculty, and staff can continue to dialogue on a variety of topics. This foundation for all Colgate students also helps me to integrate IGD into my library sessions by establishing IGD as a norm on our campus so that students are prepared for and familiar with what to expect.
Ironically, my research into how I could apply IGD to librarianship led to my becoming invested in critical theory in LIS.\(^\text{16}\) Since the introduction of the *Framework*, I’ve had many discussions with my colleagues around how my instruction incorporates critical theory (including the similar-yet-somewhat-distinct avenues of critical information literacy, critical librarianship, critical and inclusive pedagogies in LIS, and even critical reference dialogue\(^\text{17}\)). The question most often asked by my colleagues is “How do you do it?” I’ve found that utilizing IGD exercises and facilitation is one of the ways I am able to do this work.

## Connecting IGD and Critical Information Literacy

IGD is a natural fit for critical information literacy. Kate Adler, in writing about critical reference dialogue, uses Reitz’s nine elements of education to illustrate the tenets of critical pedagogy for library instruction:\(^\text{18}\) the teacher or librarian is a guide and facilitator, creating a participatory, directed dialogue with students that focuses on social problems through asking questions and unpacking logistics. The teacher or librarian must also work to establish an active rapport with the students and facilitate group solidarity into assignments that are study or action projects. Through this work, the college or library becomes an engine for social change, building alliances locally, regionally, and nationally and shedding light on where information is coming from and how to use it critically.\(^\text{19}\)

IGD works with a similar framework. Overall, when you make the decision to use IGD in the classroom, you are recognizing that there is a need for change and that the classroom is one place to enact that change. Facilitators are not experts, but act as guides. Stage 1, group beginnings, focuses on establishing the solidarity of the group, as well as introducing the practice of dialogue. Stage 2 takes the participants through a process of exploring differences and commonalities, and the facilitators use stages 1 and 2 to determine the direction of stage 3’s dialogues on hot topics. In stage 4, alliances are formed and action plans are developed.

## Incorporating IGD into the Library Classroom

Stage 1 and stage 2 are the easiest to incorporate into a limited time, such as a one-shot library session. These stages create community through engaging with one’s own social identity, as well as exploring the commonalities and differences of experience between oneself and others.
In every one-shot session I teach, for example, I introduce myself as a person who prefers to be referred to by name rather than gendered pronouns. I also share that I have a visual disability and how it will affect the classroom experience. By being vulnerable and sharing my own identity as someone who is often “othered,” it invites the students to be more comfortable with sharing their own vulnerabilities. During one-on-one time, I find that many students with minoritized identities will introduce themselves by name and pronouns or disclose their own disabilities as it affects their ability to use our resources. This can also be used for modeling my own difficulties with searching to draw the students into a dialogue about access or the research process. Establishing classroom ground rules, or using the already established rules of the course, much as Gilchrist does in her classes, is another way to build community.20

With careful consideration and in collaboration with a professor who has been using IGD throughout the semester, stage 3 can also be incorporated into a one-shot. As a facilitator, you must be careful: “Group leaders must be trained to use such exercises appropriately and effectively and must be skilled in handling the personal and intergroup issues that are likely to arise from the exercises.”21 There are low-risk and high-risk exercises for engaging in hot-button or controversial topics that you can use at your own discretion, as it is appropriate or comfortable to the situation.22 In some instances, the entire course is a hot button, such as racism in education or queering religion. Knowing how to deal with these emotions can help to keep the class session moving forward productively, as I will demonstrate later in this chapter.

The best way that I’ve found of reaching stage 4 in a one-shot context is to work with the professor to have an assignment rising out of the library session (or the overall course) where the students are able to effect some change or take some action rather than simply writing a report. Producing a podcast episode, editing Wikipedia pages, or presenting their findings in a short video are all ways that student research can be used in a more public and active way. For example, an introduction to Peace and Conflict Studies course started creating podcasts from their research projects on war, genocide, and ethnic cleansing.23 The students reported that by bringing more attention to these marginalized conflicts, they felt they were actually able to help the people they were researching in some way.24

How I’ve Incorporated IGD and Critical Information Literacy into the Library Classroom

I’ve been integrating IGD into my classroom explicitly since 2016. In the fall of 2016, I was asked to teach three 50-minute visual literacy sessions for three different
courses by Dr. Aisha Musa. I'd worked with this professor many times in the past. When we met to talk about the needs of the assignments, each class had its own focus (Legacies of the Ancient World, Sharia Law, and Introduction to the Qur’an), but the core issue was the same—the professor wanted the students to be able to engage more deeply with visual images and media and to critically examine the stories and power structures behind them. I'd been teaching visual literacy sessions for years, as well as a similar collaboration with a faculty member on Inverting the Narrative projects, but this was a good opportunity to further integrate some of what I was learning through facilitator training in IGD. I asked if I could stray from my standard visual literacy lecture that I'd done for her classes before, and she was excited by the opportunity.

I structured the class session around stage 1 and stage 2 in IGD. The professor was not actively using IGD in her own classroom at the time. At the start of the class, I introduced how I expected the students to interact by both modeling and explaining dialogue while introducing some visual literacy concepts. For Legacies of the Ancient World, made up of first- and second-year students who by that point had been the first two class years to go through the required IGD program, I also asked them to recall the first-year orientation work, which most of the students readily remembered. I used images from the professor to personalize the presentation for each course, but I also used some standard images such as emojis and memes. The majority of the class was devoted to active dialogue with the students around images, power, and meaning.

For example, I used images of Darsh Preet Singh and Veerender Jubbal, two Sikh men whose images had been edited and used in various memes as a visual stand-in for “Muslim terrorist.” An image of Singh, the first NCAA Sikh basketball player to wear a turban, was used as a popular meme. “Nobody at school wants to guard Muhammad, he’s too explosive,” one version read. Jubbal, a vocal opponent of Gamergate, had a selfie edited to include a bomb vest, Qur’an, and sex toys. His image actually appeared on the cover of a Spanish newspaper after the November 2015 attacks in France, identified as one of the men involved. At the time of the class session, most of the students hadn't actually seen these images but could recall similar situations. As a group we looked up newspaper articles and social media posts and discussed issues around them, focusing on how images can be misread and even deliberately used to mislead.

Toward the end of the class, I borrowed an image exercise from my colleague Sarah Keen, former head of Special Collections and University Archives. It’s an image of the Salt Rush, an old tradition from the 1880s or 90s where different class years of students would wrestle and throw salt at each other. Using visual thinking strategies, I asked the students to tell me what they saw in the image. Students described the scene as a riot, a protest, a fire, and even a battle, while others saw the salt as smoke or tear gas. After many minutes of dialogue, I told the students...
what the image was and described the Salt Rush ritual. It was a fascinating piece of
college history, and they all took another minute to look at the picture with the new
realization. However, I shifted from my colleague’s usual usage of the image and
pushed the students on the issue.

“Do you think that’s true? What evidence do I have that it is what I said it is?”

This caused a panic in the class, as students were insulted that I had lied to them.
Out of three sessions of eighteen students each, only one student googled “Salt Rush
Colgate” unprompted to double-check what I was saying. For the other two classes,
I needed to prompt the students to do a little searching so they could verify the
information I was sharing. It was a difficult moment of emotion in the classroom,
but also a rewarding discovery for the students as they felt the power of knowledge
and research. Further, it prompted a dialogue around the nature of authority, one
of the tenets of the Framework.

This exercise is one that could be replicated in other scenarios by using your
own college’s history or an image with an interesting, but not well-known, back-
story. Time’s 100 Photographs collection is a good resource for historical and iconic
images, complete with evidence and copyright information for the images. If the
backstory can’t easily be found online, you can also bring in primary documents or
other sources and invite the students to fact-check your story. If you are selecting a
historical image, be prepared to handle any emotions it may bring up in the class-
room, especially pictures dealing with tragic or deadly events.

Even teaching basically the same session three times in a row, it was a very reward-
ing session. I had multiple different conversations with the students as the views
they brought in were influenced by their own experiences and assumptions. I felt
that the students walked away with a better understanding of images and research
than in my past visual literacy classes. The professor, at the end of the semester, was
extremely pleased with the depth of the students’ understanding and use of images.

Another example of a library session I completely modified using IGD facilitation
was for Religions of Resistance with Dr. Paul Humphrey in the fall of 2019. The
course “studies African-derived religions and practices in the Caribbean, particu-
larly the ways in which they constitute anticolonial and decolonial perspectives and
practices.” While the professor doesn’t use IGD specifically, this course, cross-listed
in Africana and Latin American Studies/LGBTQ Studies, was a good opportunity to
bring in stage 3. By that semester, all students currently enrolled in undergraduate
classes had been through the first-year orientation IGD experience. The students
were already using a critical and queer studies perspective in the classroom, so the
library session needed to reflect that. It also gave me the opportunity to bring more
themes of anti-racism and social justice, as they fit the overall goals of the course.

For the seventy-five-minute class, I had more time to engage the students in
discussion. In addition to my typical self-introduction, I also brought attention to the
fact that I was a white person and that my experience with Caribbean religions came
from both a Western-biased and Pagan-based perspective. Throughout the session, I brought attention to issues of bias, especially as they concerned the commercial databases they would be searching. As the students would be doing more historical research, we discussed the fact that much of what they would find would likely be from a white, Western, and Christian bias. The professor, a white British man, brought in information from the course so far to reinforce and further prompt areas of discussion. His openness to standing in for a “typical” religion professor was especially helpful, as we both epitomized the very colonizers the Caribbean people were resisting.

For example, one of the areas of dialogue occurred around the Library of Congress Subject Heading “Vodou.”32 The spelling of the word was one of the early ideas covered in the class, so I was able to bring in the history of the LCSH change, as well as how students would be faced with historical spellings in articles. The discussion centered around both the importance of practitioners’ views in religious research and how you can’t automatically judge the quality of an article based on the spelling that was used without examining all the evidence. As a group, we were able to complicate the simple axiom of “peer-reviewed = good” by evaluating articles through several different lenses.

One significant situation occurred where I feel that, if I had not been trained and experienced in IGD facilitation with students, faculty, and staff, I might have had a harder time dealing with the classroom. While the class was doing some group searching, I found a small group of students talking excitedly and gesturing wildly. I asked what they found, and it was an article that used the N-word in the title. Instead of ignoring the slur in the classroom, we explored it. The student researched the professor who had written the article, looked at his other writing, and read the article to dissect the choices he made. It was an uncomfortable situation, for sure, but the students were able to tackle it in a way that demystified many aspects of scholarly communication.

Incorporating IGD and Critical Information Literacy into the Reference Consultation

With the pandemic lockdowns of 2020, courses at Colgate went completely online for the first time in its 200-year history. Typical library sessions were replaced with recorded lectures or tutorial videos as faculty scrambled to translate their face-to-face teaching to remote on the fly. With the focus on just surviving day to day for the rest of the spring semester and preparing for an uncertain fall, I found myself
experiencing more burnout than usual. The video sessions were not as satisfying, and I felt despair at having another semester of database demos and “how to access our resources from off campus” videos to look forward to. It’s important work, of course, where I could incorporate small areas of criticality, but not the kind of work that energizes me like IGD and critical information literacy.

So I decided if I couldn’t find a way to be critical and interactive in the class sessions I had, I could use those skills to be more critical in my reference consultations, the number of which tripled from pre-pandemic times. I deliberately used more of my IGD training in my consultations with students than I had before. Time was specifically spent getting to know the student and checking in on them mentally and emotionally before addressing any research questions. This was also crucial to combat the isolation many of us were feeling due to the quarantines and lockdowns.

It was a great opportunity to discuss with them the production of scholarly information. “Why can’t I find any scholarly articles on the effect that COVID-19 had on the 2020 presidential election?” was a frequent question in November that helped us to tease out many aspects of scholarly information, especially the time involved in producing and publishing articles in peer-reviewed journals, as well as the place of investigative journalism versus sensationalized news and social media posts in doing research.

While the very short interactions—usually no longer than thirty minutes—take things even further away from the “sustained” goal of IGD, they allowed me to focus on more critical interactions with the students. Until the pandemic, virtual reference interactions, regardless of length or depth, were considered purely transactional. As they became the only option for reference support, the pandemic allowed us to reconsider this lesser form of reference as being just as valuable as face-to-face consultations.

The discussions were varied, but the interactions had more depth to them. Several of the students returned to ask questions for other classes or spoke directly to the fact they would use the information and techniques in their other research projects. I also experienced more frequent follow-ups from students letting me know how the research worked out, as well as referrals from friends.

**Conclusion**

IGD can give librarians experimenting with critical theory in the library classroom some techniques and ways of sustaining dialogue to help them better integrate criticality in their teaching. More than just a professional development technique, IGD training is focused on facilitating dialogue on difficult discussions, a core tenet of critical information literacy. The techniques and experiences can also help the librarian to deal with difficult situations in the classroom and to bring in more critical theory into their teaching.
Appendix

Resources for Understanding IGD


Resources for Facilitating Dialogues


Resources on the Effectiveness of IGD


Notes


Facilitating Critical Information Literacy

Bibliography


Chapter 14


