"Developing Intergroup Relations and Intercultural Competency"

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In the most basic sociological sense, intergroup relations refer to the ways in which social groups interact with each other. In the U.S. probably the most salient social groups are defined by race and gender, though religion and sexual orientation are making strong moves into the public arena as political debate keeps them in the spotlight. As the world of work becomes more and more global for many of us, intergroup relations may include working across nationalities as social groups. So we are defining groups as collections of individuals that share core values and histories, expected patterns of behavior at a broad level, and perspectives on themselves and others.

I'm not going to be talking about the sociology, but focusing on a process promoted by the Program on Intergroup Relations at the University of Michigan and how their practice can be more widely applied outside of that academic program. Working from this same understanding of "group", the program is credit-bearing series of courses designed to help students learn skills to address social justice issues. They learn facilitation skills, history of social identities in the U.S., theories of social change, management and utility of conflict, and more. Structured intergroup dialogue is a key component of student learning. In a moment I'm going to talk about bringing the dialogue process into the Library.

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I want to connect the IGR process with intercultural competence. Intercultural competence is the ability of an individual to effectively and successfully communicate across cultural differences. It assumes a certain level of knowledge and expertise. This model has been challenged somewhat by the concept of cultural humility, which we can talk about if there's time. Intergroup dialogue is a particularly helpful tool in developing intercultural competence. Both require a deliberate and conscious effort to promote understanding across difference and to foster genuine inclusion.

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Cultural competence doesn't just happen. Even international travel doesn't necessarily promote intercultural competence, though it is often assumed to do so. Effective development of intercultural competence requires ownership of one's own culture, recognizing that it is a construct and not the One True Way, and then respectfully receiving cultural differences and, ideally, understanding their origins and social purpose in that group's context; at the very least, accepting those cultural differences without judgement and striving to assure inclusion in a mindful way. It often requires tolerating emotional uneasiness when confronted with others' lived experiences, unpleasant self-revelations, and non-

closure. Since we often try to avoid discomfort, it can be difficult to step into the unknown and begin or continue the process of developing our intercultural competence.

It's also important to keep in mind that developing any competency is a process and that it is never-ending. No one can have perfect competency in anything and, given the complexity and fluidity of cultures, you will never reach the point where you can pronounce yourself done. But improvements can happen every day with conscious effort.

So what does this have to do with libraries? I recall a colleague once telling me that she was nice to everyone so, therefore, all of this training and assessment of our patron interactions was irrelevant. Well, a.) in my observation she was *not* always nice to everyone (that's just between us) and, b.) her definition of "nice" did not necessarily correspond to the way patrons wanted or needed to be treated. It's the golden rule smack up against the platinum rule – do we do unto others as we would have done unto ourselves or do we treat people they way they would prefer to be treated? If we're culturally sensitive, we try for the latter. And even if we fail, we hope to learn and grow from the experience.

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I've also heard colleagues in my library say things like, "I don't work with the public so I don't need diversity training." Ouch! I think that is based on an underlying assumption that all of their co-workers share the same cultural background, so there isn't a need to be aware of cultural differences. Intellectually we know that's not true. But in our day-to-day practice it's easy to fall into habits of behavior based on our own backgrounds and cultures. I also once heard a colleague suggest that concern about differences is disruptive to the workplace – if we just focus on the job at hand we don't need to go into any other details about diversity because it would cause conflict. Again, perhaps there is a presumption of a common core. But if you can't understand that your office mate's behavior, which you find annoying, is culturally-derived, your work can still be disrupted and conflict ridden. To maximize workplace climate and individuals' sense of psychological safety at work – and, consequently better team work, staff longevity and commitment, and job satisfaction – awareness of and respect for differences is step one. Valuing and actually utilizing those differences to the benefit of the organization is the ultimate goal.

In the way the IRG program designs intergroup dialogue is a deliberate process from start to finish. In our Library we aren't quite as deliberate. Dialogues are generally monthly, depending on the weather. Topics for discussion have usually been selected by the Library Diversity Council. Recently the Council sponsored a session called YouTube does diversity in which several short YouTube videos touching on different dimensions of diversity were viewed and discussed. One video, called "A Girl Like Me" shows a contemporary replication of the 1950's experiment with African American children choosing between white and black dolls. The newer study showed that the African American children today still chose the white doll more often than the Black doll when asked which they preferred or which doll was the good doll. That was a particularly poignant moment in the video and attendees discussed their reactions to that part of the video. It also gave us a chance to talk about issues of beauty ideals in American culture

and the impact on many women of African heritage. We've also used readings and presentations as focal points for dialogue.

Another example of a more deliberate dialogue is a community group with which I've been active for almost six years. It's called the Race and Conciliation Encounters dialogue group and is deliberately built to focus on dialogue about race between members of different racial groups. Trained facilitators and specific dialogue guidelines help to keep the group open, non-judgmental, and reflective. Each dialogue series lasts eight weeks. Many people return three and four times for the opportunity to grow in their understanding of the experiences and perspectives of others. One Asian American participant recently shared that the experience of doing dialogue in this way had had an impact on their career interests. A white participant said that using the dialogue guides outside of dialogue helped in cross-cultural communication. And an African American participant said that they could bring things to the dialogue that couldn't be shared elsewhere except with family. Another white participant, whose spouse is a person of color, once described participation as an experience of lost innocence while gaining perspectives and language that was new and thought-provoking.

The difference between this dialogue experience and the one at the Library is that it has a specific topic, it lasts over several weeks with the same people, and facilitators have gone through considerable training. The Library Diversity Council members have had some training, but nothing to the degree of the RACE facilitators. The things shared in the RACE dialogue show both an increased self-awareness and understanding and a broadened understanding of others. So we can see intergroup dialogue in action promoting improved intercultural competency.

A goal in the workplace could be the normalization of talking about identity and sharing of personal and cultural experiences.

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If you would like to take a look at some readings or videos that we have used in our Library, please take a look at the handout available on Google docs at the bit.ly URL in this last slide.