

*Examining Dialogic Opportunities in Higher Education:  
Lessons Learned From Dialogue Courses for Jewish Students*

Lipaz Shamo-Nir, Zefat Academic College, Israel

The Asian Conference on Ethics, Religion & Philosophy 2023  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

An academic student dialogue is a facilitated discussion that provides an opportunity for students in higher education to share perspectives and experiences, while at the same time challenging participants to understand why they hold certain views and attitudes. Because dialogues for secular and religious Jewish students in Israel aim to understand and discuss different viewpoints among these groups, curricular goals are tailored to fit this specific course content. A content analysis was undertaken on final papers of 96 undergraduate students as part of their obligations for academic credit in the dialogue course in which they participated. The papers included a description of student experiences during the dialogue. This article explores research findings that highlight the importance of structuring dialogue experiences that challenge students' moral thinking, trigger an engagement in self-discovery and enhance inter-group understandings. Future directions include investigating changes to students' identity as a consequence of specific types of dialogic interactions.

Keywords: Religious-Secular, Intergroup Dialogue, Higher Education, Jewish, Students, Israel

**iafor**

The International Academic Forum

[www.iafor.org](http://www.iafor.org)

## Introduction

An academic student dialogue is a process which allows participants with differing viewpoints to gain a deeper understanding of their own and others' perspectives on a topic or issue (Shamoa-Nir, 2017b). Intergroup dialogues are structured conversations between members of different cultures, ethnicities or religions through a collaborative communication process that engages people in self-other exchanges (Dessel & Rogge, 2008; Nagda et al., 2009). The literature points to two sets of processes within the intergroup dialogues: the psychological processes that occur within individuals (Dovidio et al., 2004), and the communication processes that occur among these individuals (Nagda, 2006).

Intergroup dialogues that were implemented in international, community and academic settings and research indicate positive results in these settings (Dessel et al., 2006). In particular, studies have indicated that a discourse on intergroup religious conflict functions as an opportunity for a meaningful process on both a personal and a social level (Shamoa-Nir, 2017a; Shamoa-Nir, 2022). As a complement to this line of research, this paper explores the dialogic experiences process from dialogue courses focusing on secular-religious dialogues conducted in a higher-education environment. Through analysis of these experiences, a framework will be generated to identify significant elements of dialogue, particularly those that create a classroom space that encourages students' self-exploration and social learning processes in dialogic interaction.

A multi-cultural Israeli college was chosen in which Israeli-Jews and Israeli-Arabs mixed daily throughout the campus community. This includes in-classes and extra-mural activities (Shamoa-Nir, 2014). Student of the college were offered the opportunity to engage in an extended, structured course of dialogues aimed at exploring questions of Jewish identity over the course of a semester (Shamoa-Nir & Hellinger, 2015). At the end of the semester students were asked to submit a written piece that focused on their experiences during the dialogue.

The dialogue course investigated in this study takes place over one semester, 13 sessions of four academic hours each. Each group comprised between 18-23 students and included Jewish students: religious, traditional and secular. The course comprised workshops in the following subjects: (a) The first encounters were devoted to getting to know one another and included discussions of the following issues: stereotypes, tolerance and pluralism, and relations with the 'other.' At the end of these encounters, the students participated in a weekend seminar for all the dialogue groups, including group activities for the entire program, and comprising lectures, workshops and consolidation activities moderated by the students; (b) The middle portion of the course was devoted to discussion on Jewish-Israeli identity and relationships between religion and state, Judaism and democracy. In this portion, in addition to class encounters, participants participated in seminars of introduction to ultra-Orthodox Jews and a symposium on moral contents of secular Jewish identity; (c) The third portion of the semester comprised workshops on significant personal, general and social issues (which were not necessarily related to religion), morality and ethics, relationships and marriage, gender and education.

Considering this context, this research study sought to explore the perceptions of Israeli-Jews in a culturally diverse context. With this in mind, the following research questions were examined: (1) how did participants express their learning during dialogues? (2) whether and how participants integrated new perceptions into their personal perspectives?

## **Methodology**

### ***Participants***

Ninety-six undergraduate students participated in the research, fifty-one of whom were women and forty-five were men, and all ninety-four were born in Israel. Forty-three defined themselves as secular, thirty-three as religious and twenty as traditional. The distinction between the religious affiliations of the participants was based on their self-definition. Therefore, and in accordance with definitions in Israel, the participants identified themselves as belonging to one of these three groups: secular, traditional or religious. In general, religious and secular affiliations are not limited to Israeli society; however, the traditional affiliation requires an explanation. Traditional Jews see themselves as practicing Jews who do not keep all the laws of Judaism. Typically, traditional Jews maintain traditional Jewish laws and customs that are considered symbolic and significant from motives of solidarity with the Jewish people.

All students gave their consent to participate in the research, and all demographic information was deleted from the papers. The papers were written personally, and were submitted at the end of the course. A content analysis was undertaken on final papers as part of their obligations for academic credit. The papers included a description of student experiences during the dialogue.

### ***Coding strategy***

The coding process followed qualitative analysis procedures delineated by Bryman (2004). First, analysis was conducted on an initial set of 9 papers (3 secular, 3 religious and 3 traditional), which were closely studied for themes by the author and a former facilitator. After discussing which themes to pursue (Interrater agreement 95%) a coding scheme for the major themes and subthemes was developed. The coding scheme was used to analyze all the papers, while marking the presence or absence of relevant themes in each paper. After all coding was completed, two undergraduate research assistants' students did a separate blind coding that was compared with the author's codes. The coding results had high reliability (Interrater agreement ranged from 87% to 98%). The analysis reported in this research was based on the author coding.

## **Results**

A large majority of participants felt that a dialogue course is "a good thing" (participant 32) and "really gives an opportunity to properly share our experiences and values" (participant 14), reflecting the broad tendency of students to engage morality and religion as important issues in life. However, some (15%) viewed it as an academic experience that does not make a special contribution to their lives. In addition, more than half of the participants noted difficulty in speaking openly about themselves during the dialogue meetings. As participant 7 wrote: "I would say that it was not easy to share private ideas for most people in the dialogue." Nearly half of the participants were clear in their belief that higher-education institutions should stay out of politics, while 20% said they should express their views on day-to-day social and political questions.

At the same time, most participants pointed to several factors that enabled them to pursue the challenging discourse and promoted self-discovery in the dialogue. These subthemes are presented in table 1. Within these subthemes, it seems that dialogue course participants

interacted in dialogue with each other, accepting parts of the other's ideas or dispositions as part of the group process which enables self-discovery.

<b>Coding Scheme</b>			
<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Theme Content</b>	<b>Example</b>	<b>Interrater agreement</b>
Practicing the ability to listen to opposing views	Participants refer to the positive benefit of dealing with opposing views	"I think it's wonderful to be able to discuss personal issues with other participants, and be able to state your point of view, and have people agree or disagree with you."	97%
Religious sub-groups discussions	Participants explain how discussions in small groups for participants religious sub-groups contributed to self-discovery in the dialogue	"In small various groups [religious sub-groups] we had more opportunities to detail our arguments, and then that enabled us to continue the conversation having a real understanding of each other's opinions."	95%
Facilitator role in self-discovery	Participants describe facilitation style and behaviors that contributed to self-exploration during the workshops	"A lot of times in several meetings, you could say something and your idea is very shallow, however the facilitator engages you because you have to go deeper."	89%
Participants' support	Participants explain how communication and mutual support between the group members contributed to the dialogue	"I think it's wonderful to be able to discuss personal issues with other participants, and be able to state your point of view, and have people agree or disagree with you."	90%

Table 1: Coding scheme for factors that enabled self-discovery in the dialogue

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

This study explored experiences of participants in facilitated dialogues between religious and secular Jewish students in Israel. The findings indicate that this challenging discourse provided an opportunity for participants to share their attitudes regarding Jewish beliefs and in particular, to speak from their own perspectives. It is important to note that the investigated dialogue did not aim to promote a certain Jewish perspective but rather helped participants understand varying viewpoints. Hence, findings showed that the discourse was a sharing process which allowed different attitudes and viewpoints to be held side-by-side. Moreover, the introspective process was promoted by experienced facilitators that encouraged discussions and critical thinking about participants' perspectives.

This examination of religious discourse through a framework of dialogic interaction highlights three issues involving the knowledge and dispositions of both participants and facilitators. First, dialogue meetings include structured collaborative group activities, consequently promoting familiarity and trust between participants. This provides opportunities for students to establish positive relationships and connections as well as opportunities for students to develop and practice strategies that foster emotional regulation.

Second, the dialogue process promotes reflection and provides a means to encourage inclusive practices of communication between participants. Interactive tasks allow students to be more actively engaged in the learning experience in particular, in structured small group or breakout room discussions. Third, the findings indicate that identity processes in a multicultural context occur during dialogue meetings.

The study main limitation is the relatively small sample size of college students. However, the papers produced findings with great depth which can contribute to our understanding of how an individual explores his/her identity within daily experience. Moreover, the findings may contribute to the development and design of programs that will help individuals better engage within societies with ethno-religious diversity. Nonetheless, a study with a larger sample is recommended in order to advance our understanding of identity formation among college students.

Taken together, dialogues pose personal and moral questions, prompt introspection and encourage self-reflection. The current research findings indicate that dialogues can be seen both as a worldview and as a tool for action in the following manner: dialogue reflects a moral approach regarding relationships between people and social systems, and by applying this approach, dialogic interactions are established as a preferred pattern of action in relationships between people and groups, in community and educational organizations, and in the business world.

### **Acknowledgements**

The author thanks the facilitators and students who participated in the dialogue courses.

## References

- Bryman, A. (2004). Qualitative research on leadership: A critical but appreciative review. *The leadership quarterly*, 15(6), 729-769.
- Dessel, A., Rogge, M. E., & Garlington, S. B. (2006). Using intergroup dialogue to promote social justice and change. *Social work*, 51(4), 303-315.
- Dessel, A., & Rogge, M. E. (2008). Evaluation of intergroup dialogue: A review of the empirical literature. *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, 26(2), 199-238.
- Dovidio, J. F., Gaertner, S. L., Stewart, T. L., Esses, V. M., ten Vergert, M., and Hodson, G. (2004). From intervention to Outcome: Processes in the reduction of bias. In W. G. Stephan & W. P. Vogt (Eds.), *Education programs for improving intergroup relations: Theory, research and practice*, 243-265. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Nagda, B. A. (2006). Breaking barriers, crossing boundaries, building bridges: Communication processes in intergroup dialogues. *Journal of Social Issues*, 62(3), 553-576.
- Nagda, B. A., Gurin, P., Sorensen, N., & Zúñiga, X. (2009). Evaluating intergroup dialogue: Engaging diversity for personal and social responsibility. *Diversity & democracy*, 12(1), 4-6.
- Shamoa-Nir, L. (2014). Defining Resilience from Practice: Case study of resilience building in a multi-cultural College. *Procedia Economics and Finance*, 18, 279-286.
- Shamoa-Nir, L. (2017a). A dialogue with the 'self': Identity exploration processes in intergroup dialogue for Jewish students in Israel. *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction*, 13, 1-10.
- Shamoa-Nir, L. (2017b). The window becomes a mirror: the use of the Johari Window model to evaluate stereotypes in intergroup dialogue in Israel. *Israel Affairs*, 1-20.
- Shamoa-Nir, L. (2022). 'Under the radar': How Jewish-Arab conflict is reflected in internal Jewish dialogue? *International Journal of Psychological Studies*, 14(1).
- Shamoa-Nir, L. & Hellinger, M. (2015). Dialogue between religious and secular Jews In Israel. *Social issues in Israel*, 19, 64-94. (in Hebrew).

**Contact email:** [lipaznir@zahav.net.il](mailto:lipaznir@zahav.net.il)