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## Recommended Citation

Charaniya, Nadira K. and Walsh, Jane West (2001). "Adult Learning in the Context of the Interreligious Dialogue Process: A Collaborative Research Study Involving Christians, Jews and Muslims," *Adult Education Research Conference*.  
<http://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2001/papers/19>

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# 2001 AERC Proceedings

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## Adult Learning in the Context of the Interreligious Dialogue Process: A Collaborative Research Study Involving Christians, Jews and Muslims

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**Abstract: This paper reports on a collaborative qualitative research study where the purpose was to explore the nature of the learning that occurs in the interreligious dialogue process. Participants were 20 Christian, Jewish and Muslim adults who have participated in interreligious dialogue, for a period of more than a year.**

The purpose of this research study is to investigate the nature of the learning that occurs when individuals of different religious groups intentionally participate in purposeful and sustained interreligious dialogue. The religious landscape of America is rapidly changing (Eck, 1993), with a variety of new religious communities reshaping the dimensions of the Protestant, Catholic and Jewish American milieu understood to have defined the parameters of religious difference in America, in the mid 20th century (Herberg, 1955). As such, people of different religious traditions do not live on isolated, separate islands; rather they are in constant contact, "bump[ing] up against one another all the time" (Eck, 1993, p.190). This is a reality not only on the local and national scene here in America, but is also evident worldwide where often this bumping up against the other is accompanied by violence. It is our belief, framed within a pluralistic worldview (Eck, 1993), that if we can understand how to enable the transition from being strangers with our religious neighbors to not only accepting, but deeply understanding them, we will have moved forward as a society. The process of acknowledgement of and understanding about religious difference, accompanied by interpersonal relationships characterized by empathy, can be a critical and practical part of the process of life today. We agree with Eck that religious particularities and differing understandings of spirituality are the subject of dialogue, not a target for elimination (exclusivism) or inclusion into a larger majority norm (inclusivism). Diversity and plurality of religious commitment offer opportunities for dialogue and engagement that can lead to outcomes marked by "mutual discovery, understanding, and, indeed, transformation" (Eck, 1993, p.168). It was investigation of if, and how, the process of interreligious dialogue enables this journey of discovery and understanding, that was the focus of the study.

This research contributes to the field of adult education in two distinctly different ways. The first contribution is to address a lack in the adult education literature relating to the process of crossing of borders of religious difference. Currently, the field of adult education includes

scholarship in the area of adult religious education, as well as scholarship relating to learning across borders of difference. However, understanding the processes of interreligious dialogue and adult learning remains primarily in the hands of the seasoned practitioners, men and women who are attempting to do this work in communities all across America. Very little has been written about the processes of how individuals who engage in interreligious dialogue gain meaningful understanding of other religions and eliminate erroneous assumptions about them. This study was in response to Boys and Lee's hope that their work on the Catholic-Jewish Colloquium would "stimulate serious reflection on the goals and processes of conversation between religious traditions in order to foster a genuinely pluralistic society." (1996, p. 417). It is our hope that our research will inspire further interest and research about interreligious dialogue, within the field of adult education. In addition, this study also adds to the growing literature on collaborative inquiry and collaborative research in academic settings (Heron 1996; Mealman & Lawrence, 1998; Saltiel, Sgroi, & Brockett, 1998).

### **Methodology**

This research study developed out of our own interreligious dialogue experiences with one another. Nadira is a Shi'a Ismaili Muslim who is a first generation American, born in Africa, and educated in the Western tradition in London, New York, Toronto, and Chicago. Jane is a third generation Ashkenazi American Jew, raised in a Conservative Jewish home and educated in American public schools, on the East Coast. We met in 1998, in the context of being members of an adult education doctoral cohort at National - Louis University in Chicago. In this context of our doctoral studies, we not only became interreligious dialogue partners and facilitators of interreligious conversations, when the opportunities presented themselves to us, we also became collaborative learning and collaborative inquiry research partners. Important to this process is the fact that we both are active as religious educators within our particular religious communities.

This study explored two questions: (a) What is the nature of the learning that occurs in the interreligious dialogue process, and (b) What are the implications of learning in the context of interreligious dialogue for the field of adult education? As collaborative, qualitative, research scholars, we locate ourselves particularly within a constructivist theoretical frame (Schwandt, 1998). This framework is expressed primarily through our understanding that our own knowledge about interreligious dialogue was co-constructed in the interpersonal and social context of the collaboration itself. It was in the ongoing conversation with one another throughout the research process, and with the participants in our study as we collected data, that the knowledge developed. Furthermore, we acknowledge that the meanings that the participants in our research gave to their experiences were influenced by the questions that we asked and the manner in which we probed. Those questions, in turn, were influenced and guided by our own experiences of learning about interreligious dialogue by doing interreligious dialogue; much in the way that others have learned about group learning by doing group learning (Kasl, Dechant and Marsick, 1993).

The study focuses on the experiences of 20 adults, including ourselves, in four different contexts of interreligious dialogue: (a) the interreligious dialogue process initiated consciously and purposefully by us, a Jew and a Muslim, with one another; (b) a Muslim-Jewish dialogue program sponsored by a Jewish communal agency (the Shalom/Salaam group); (c) a community-

wide Christian-Jewish dialogue program sponsored by a non-profit organization (the Origins group); and (d) an independently initiated Christian-Jewish women's dialogue group (the Living Room group). Participants in the study are 7 Christian, 5 Muslim, and 8 Jewish adults, who have participated voluntarily in interreligious dialogue, for at least one year. All of the participants were middle to upper-middle class Americans. Participant ages ranged from 40's to 60's for 19 participants with 1 in her mid 30's. 16 of the participants were white. Of these 16, 5 were male and 11 were female. In addition, there was 1 African-American male, 1 male of color from Egypt, and 2 women of color from the Indo-Pak subcontinent.

There are at least three ways in which our research design is collaborative: (a) we are co-researchers meaning that we engaged in collaborative planning and decision-making about the research, collecting and analyzing data, and writing up the research; (b) we are participants within the study ourselves as research and dialogue partners who, interestingly, live in two different states; and (c) we collaboratively developed and facilitated the Collaborative Inquiry Metaphor Creation and Analysis Method (CIMCAM) in order to foster critical reflection about the nature of the learning in the context of interreligious dialogue (Charaniya & West Walsh, 2000). The study describes the five specific steps of CIMCAM in detail, and provides examples from the focus group transcripts that reflect how the process worked in the field.

Data collected fall into four categories: (a) data about our own learning as participants and co-researchers in interreligious dialogue, (b) data from individual and focus group interviews, (c) data from observation and facilitation of dialogue groups (including our own), and (d) data from documents. We used the constant comparative method of coding data. In the final phase of the data analysis, we used Ethnograph software to help us physically organize clusters of data, while working collaboratively and living in two different parts of the country. The collaborative process added an element of triangulation to many aspects of the research process. It is most notable as a factor in the research decision-making process and in the ongoing process of data analysis.

## **Findings**

There are 3 primary findings of the study that will be discussed here: motivations rooted in openness and significant past experiences; interreligious learning as a three fold affective, cognitive, and symbolic knowledge construction process, and social action as inspiration and outcome of interreligious dialogue.

### *Motivations Rooted in Personal Openness and Significant Past Experiences*

Motivation to initiate and sustain involvement in interreligious dialogue over a significant period of time appears to be characterized by one or more of the following experiences: (a) institutional, structural, and personal support, (b) significant life experiences, (c) personal characteristics, and (d) personal interpretation of religious tradition.

Institutional, structural, and personal support included being asked to participate in a dialogue group, by a religious mentor, friend, or colleague. Jack, an African - American Baptist deacon who is a participant in the Origins group, got involved in dialogue through the encouragement of his pastor whereas friends or colleagues invited participants of the Living Room group to join

them. It also included the attention to the parameters of expectations established within the dialogue (including curriculum and dialogue content) and the support systems that were in place to deal with bumps in the road. Alice, a white Jewish Origins group participant, explained how having pre-selected texts and a discussion guide, helped her: "It gave us an opportunity to speak about neutral things without getting total strangers to have some *thing* to talk about. It wasn't intimate and wasn't personal right off the bat."

Significant life experiences that participants described as having impacted their motivation to engage included (a) having a history of family interaction patterns that fostered and/or supported participation in interreligious dialogue and (b) significant experiences with the "other" (both positive and negative) that triggered a desire to engage. Hillary, an Orthodox Jewish female participant in the Shalom/Salaam group, talked of growing up in a home in which there existed "an innate respect for someone else's faith system" and one in which her parents' non-Jewish friends were welcomed. Reshma, a Muslim female participant in the Shalom/Salaam group, described how her first awareness of the need for interreligious dialogue happened when an older Jewish woman at a public meeting held about the building of a mosque, confronted her saying "I don't want you making bombs in my back yard." This was the catalyst for the group.

Participants reported the personal characteristics of intellectual curiosity and a tolerance for ambiguity as key motivators. Diane, a white Christian participant in both the Origins project and the Living Room dialogue group, shared with us her love of learning and the fact that she had always asked questions about faith. Linking these personal characteristics with personal interpretation of her Episcopalian tradition, she said that her whole life "has been . . . about living the questions. Not necessarily finding answers." She goes on to explain "[my parents] remember [my] coming home from church and saying, 'How could Jesus be Jewish and Christian at the same time?'"

As deeply committed religious people, other participants also grounded their motivation to participate in how they interpreted their own religious traditions. Alim, a white Muslim who participates in the Shalom/Salaam group, offers a good example of this when he said, about the multi-year existence of the group: "I think, if you said what made this happen, I would say God made it happen."

### *Learning in interreligious dialogue is an Affective, Symbolic, and Cognitive Process*

Based on the descriptions shared by the participants in the study, we have come to understand the interreligious dialogue experience as one that involves interacting with the "other" using the mind, the heart, the ears, the mouth, and the spirit. It is what Dirkx (1997) refers to as "learning through soul", which is when "the socioemotional and the intellectual world meet" (p.85). We learned that while the overall experience activates the cognitive, the affective, and the symbolic ways of thinking and interacting, there were times when the affective domain was a more prominently featured aspect of the learning experience. We understood these experiences to be a kind of connected knowing where the interpersonal sharing leads to new insights about one another on a profoundly human level. It is collaborative learning (Lee, 2000) in that it engages the whole person and results in the creation of shared, new meanings that are informed by critical reflection on the meanings of existing symbols, assumptions and understandings. This process enabled participants to develop a better understanding of both "self" and "other." This process,

and the importance of the interaction between cognitive, affective and symbolic, was captured by Nadira when she said: "This process of learning and the experience of doing it with someone who cares and can understand what I am going through, is unlike anything I have experienced before." Bill, a white, Jewish male, echoed it, when he said that when people are talking about their religious understandings and experiences in the context of the dialogue, they are doing so because whatever they are talking about has deep meaning for them, it has "moved" them somehow and "if you are really listening, you can't help but be moved by whatever it is that moved them . . . you know it resonates with you."

#### *Social Action As Inspiration and Outcome of Interreligious Dialogue*

Specific outcomes that could be defined as aspects of a stance towards social action that participants identified as being a result of engagement in interreligious dialogue, included (a) voluntary participation in committees that consider interreligious issues and actions within the institutional structure of the same-religious group; (b) increased ability to represent the complexities of the other religion in contrast to ones own in social or educational contexts; (c) increased deliberation and critical reflection before emotionally responding to media reported incidents involving the interaction of members of the two religious groups; (d) voluntarily engaging in self-directed learning projects, in the times in-between meetings, such as independent reading, learning from others not in the dialogue program, through conversation about their religious ideas and practices, watching videos and enrollment in formal courses and programs of study of religion; (e) articulation of hopefulness for further opportunities for action; and (f) articulation of a vision of a better future for the world, and the next generation, as a result of the learning and modeling for others. In the Shalom/Salaam group, for example, two of the participants - One Jewish (Rachel) and one Muslim (Alim) - wrote a joint letter to the Christian Broadcasting Network in response to negative remarks about Muslims that had been made by Pat Robertson. Diane is an active member of her church's committee on interreligious affairs. Nadira, Jane, Reshma, and Ross, a white, Jewish male member of the Shalom/Salaam group, reported being better able to represent the "other" within their own communities. Jane is a founding member of a new Interfaith Alliance chapter. She accepted an invitation to speak from a Jewish perspective in a program sponsored by the Islamic Student Association, at a local college. These are but a few examples of how learning through interreligious dialogue has led to action, in the world outside of the dialogue context.

### **Discussions, Conclusion and Implications**

Mezirow (1991) asserts that learning is all about making meaning, that one learns through a process of making explicit, connecting with, interpreting, remembering, validating, and acting upon "some aspect of our engagement with the environment, other persons, or ourselves." (p.11) In describing this process of making meaning, or learning, in the context of interreligious dialogue, participants in the study painted a picture of experiences in which knowledge was socially and collaboratively constructed. This learning that the participants described was more than simply a matter of gathering facts and information about the "other." It was more than a rational exercise in "constructive discourse to use the experience of others to assess reasons justifying [one's] assumptions, and making an action decision based on the resulting insight" (Mezirow, 2000, p.8). Rather, it was a process of listening, hearing, questioning, relating, symbolizing, feeling, and storying. By storying, we mean a process by which participants

engaged in the sharing, revising, and enlargement of narratives related to religious teachings, religious beliefs, and personal life stories as they relate to who they are as religious people (Rossiter, 1999).

It is a site for sharing understandings of faith as a process of "finding coherence in and giving meaning to the multiple forces and relations that make up our lives" (Fowler, 1981, p 4). Tisdell (1999) tells us that spiritual development cannot be separated from the sociocultural context of the learner. She highlights the idea that particular spiritual and religious meanings are attached to culturally embedded images and symbols. "Our identity is constantly shifting, and our understanding of culture and spirituality is always being renegotiated as we interact with others who are of different cultural and spiritual backgrounds." (p. 94). Interreligious dialogue is a context for sharing symbols and images through stories, metaphors, word concepts, and texts. As such, it is a context in which spiritual development, and the learning that accompanies that process, can take place.

From this research, we understand the nature of the learning in the context of interreligious dialogue to be best described as incremental transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000), characterized by collaborative learning (Lee, 2000), that is mediated through symbols and metaphors in various forms (Dirkx, 1997; Fowler, 1981; Rossiter, 1999). Learning in this context fosters adult development in the spiritual dimension (Tisdell, 1999). Interreligious dialogue engages the whole person in that it is linked to the learner's cognitive, affective, and symbolic domains of meaning making. Further research is needed in order to understand the important role that symbols and metaphors play in more depth. We hope that this study will inspire additional research and further exploration of adult education practice, in the area of interreligious dialogue.

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