

“We’re All Squares on a Screen”: Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Opportunities and Limitations of Online Intergroup Dialogue

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Abstract

Post-secondary institutions are seeing the need and searching for ways to prepare their students for life in an increasingly complex and often polarized society. Since its development in the late 1980s, intergroup dialogue (IGD) has become a prominent dialogic pedagogy that brings together small, diverse groups of college students to dialogue on topics related to diversity, equity, equality, and belonging. Though IGD has traditionally been an in-person experience, postsecondary institutions were required to offer IGD online during the COVID-19 pandemic, making it important to discern what opportunities and limitations may come with such online delivery. Guided by theories of intergroup contact and intergroup dialogue, we interviewed 16 college students who had participated in IGD via Zoom regarding their online IGD experience, illuminating a variety of opportunities and limitations that are interpersonal and intrapersonal in nature. Emergent themes, along with their implications for IGD theory, practice, and future research, are discussed.

Keywords: Intergroup dialogue, online learning, digital learning, belonging, college teaching

Jackson, G., Schiffecker, S. & Poquet, O. (2025) “We’re all squares on a screen”: Interpersonal and intrapersonal opportunities and limitations of online intergroup dialogue. *Online Learning*, 29(2), pp. 118–139. <https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v29i2.4444>

Throughout the world, postsecondary institutions are seeing the need and searching for ways to prepare their students for life in an increasingly complex and often polarized society (Abes et al., 2019; Miles & Shinew, 2022; Morphew & Hartley, 2006). Since its development at the University of Michigan in the 1980s, the “Michigan model” of intergroup dialogue (IGD) has become a prominent social justice pedagogy utilized at hundreds of colleges throughout the U.S. (Jackson, 2021), promoting intrapersonal student development and interpersonal understanding, relationships, and collaboration through multi-session dialogues on the often-polarizing topics of diversity, equity, and belonging (Gurin et al., 2013; Hurtado, 2001). The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic required the majority of IGD programs and facilitators to deliver the IGD curriculum, pedagogy, and overall experience (described in detail hereafter) online for the first time (Nagda et al., 2021; Yeakley, 2020), making it important to study the ways in which online delivery can enhance and/or hinder the purposes and intended outcomes of IGD.

Given this sudden and unprecedented transition of IGD to online delivery, the resulting possibility that IGD could become increasingly online going forward (Yeakley, 2020), and the limited research that has been conducted on online IGD thus far, the purpose of this study was to begin to discern and better understand the opportunities and limitations that come with the online delivery of IGD. In addition to this primary focus on IGD, a related purpose of this study was to provide insights that can help inform other forms of online learning, e-learning, and distance education, particularly those that are dialogic in nature, focus on matters of diversity, and/or have had to similarly and suddenly transition from in-person to online delivery in recent years (Conklin & Dikkers, 2021; Miller et al., 2023; Saltz & Heckman, 2020; Vally Essa et al., 2023). Grounded in theories of intergroup contact and IGD, the present study focuses on the perceptions and experiences of students who participated in online IGD. In the sections that follow, we provide a more detailed description of IGD, its various intrapersonal and interpersonal processes and outcomes (Gurin et al., 2013), as well as a review of the literature that guided this study and the development of our overarching research question:

RQ: What interpersonal and intrapersonal opportunities and limitations emerged in conjunction with the online nature of students’ IGD experience?

Literature Review

Intergroup Dialogue in Practice

IGD brings together small groups of college students (ca. 8-15) from diverse social identity groups to dialogue on topics related to diversity, equity, and belonging, often focusing on a particular dimension of identity (e.g., race, gender, sexuality, class, religion, ability, citizenship). Groups meet weekly throughout an academic term, and the IGD experience is guided by two facilitators whose social identities are representative of the topic and identities present in the group (Maxwell et al., 2011). The focus of IGD on personal, identity-based, lived experiences related to the topic distinguishes dialogue from discussion (a more impersonal exchange of ideas on the topic) and debate (proving or disproving claims related to the topic) (Nagda & Zúñiga, 2003). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, IGD was thought to be (and implemented as) an in-person experience (Gurin et al., 2013), with only a few instances of online implementation (Yeakley, 2020).

Within each IGD session, various activities (e.g., sharing written testimonials, completing social identity profiles, participating in “gallery walks” and “uncommon ground” activities) provide opportunities for reflection and dialogue between participants (Gurin et al., 2013; Zúñiga et al., 2007). As part of each activity, co-facilitators lead the group in a dialogue regarding how they felt as they participated in the activity and what they learned about intergroup conflict and societal status quos (Quaye & Johnson, 2024).

IGD’s weekly sessions are collectively designed to move participants through four phases, with a few sessions dedicated to each: (1) forming and developing relationships, (2) exploring commonalities and differences, (3) discussing controversial topics, and (4) action planning and alliance building (Zúñiga et al., 2007). In the first phase, participants are given opportunities to get to know each other, learn principles of dialogue, co-create guidelines for their semester together, and engage in related activities. In the second phase, participants learn about social identities, privilege, and oppression, and they explore commonalities and differences among group members. In the third phase, students dialogue about controversial topics related to the IGD topic. The final phase focuses on participants crystallizing what they are taking away from the experience and sharing what practical steps they can take to promote equity, belonging, and justice within their own spheres of influence.

Intergroup Dialogue Research and Theory

Decades of social psychological research associated with intergroup contact (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998) and IGD (see Dessel & Rogge, 2008 and Frantell et al., 2019, for reviews) have identified a variety of pedagogical, structural, communicative, social, and psychological processes associated with productive intergroup contact and dialogue. This study was guided by and grounded in these literatures, informing the development of our research question, interview protocol, and subsequent data analysis (as described hereafter).

Intergroup Contact Theory

Based on his review of the intergroup contact research conducted in the 1930s and 1940s, Allport (1954) theorized that four conditions are necessary to promote positive and productive intergroup contact: (a) equal status among groups, (b) group cooperation, (c) a common goal, and (d) approval of authorities for groups to interact. Allport’s contact theory would be supported empirically by dozens of studies over the next four decades (see Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006 for a review). In Pettigrew’s (1998) reformulation of contact theory, which became known as intergroup contact theory, he added a fifth condition: The interactions are such that there is the potential for friendship.

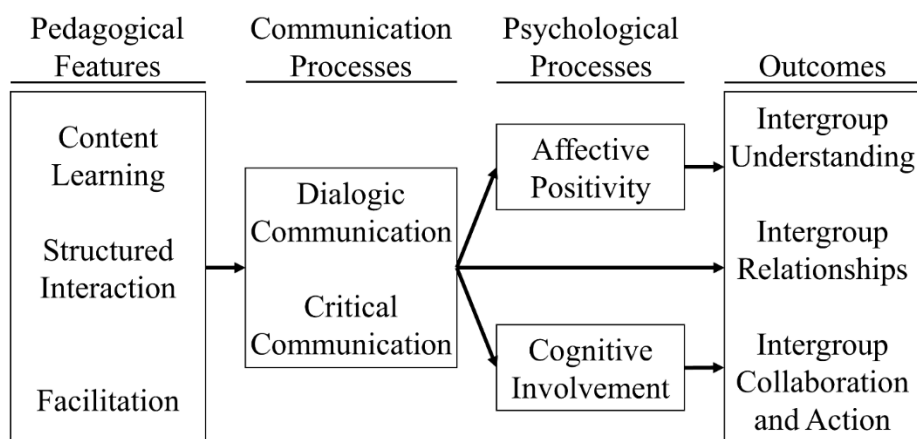
Though the traditional, in-person IGD experience is well-aligned with the literature on intergroup contact (Jackson, 2022; Joyce et al., 2024), it is possible that one or more of these five conditions are not as firmly in place when IGD is delivered online. Thus, our interview protocol included questions that would prompt participants to discuss the ways in which they felt the online platform helped create and/or constrain such conditions.

The Critical-Dialogic Theoretical Framework of Intergroup Dialogue

Building on intergroup contact theory and related social psychological research, IGD researchers would conduct multiple studies in the early 2000s (see Jackson, 2022 for a review) that would inform the development of the critical-dialogic theoretical framework of intergroup dialogue, which describes how IGD promotes a variety of interconnected intergroup processes and outcomes (Gurin et al., 2013). As illustrated in Figure 1, IGD's pedagogical features (e.g., co-facilitation, structured interactions, academic content) have been found to promote communication among participants that is both dialogic (i.e., focused on lived experience) and critical (i.e., oriented towards improving the status quo) (Nagda, 2006). In turn, these forms of dialogic and critical communication have been found to promote intrapersonal, psychological processes associated with the cognitive and emotional dimensions of the IGD experience (cognitive involvement and affective positivity, respectively) (Nagda et al., 2004). Cognitive involvement refers to the complexity of thinking required to see issues from others' perspectives and to reflect on one's assumptions about oneself, one's identities, and societal status quos. Affective positivity refers to the positive emotions that students have as they engage with difficult topics, their peers, and come to better understand others and themselves. Collectively, these communication and psychological processes promote intergroup understanding, intergroup relationships, and intergroup collaboration and action (Gurin et al., 2013; Gurin-Sands et al., 2012; Nagda et al., 2009; Sorensen et al., 2009).

Figure 1

A Critical-Dialogic Theoretical Framework of Intergroup Dialogue



Note. Adapted with permission from *Dialogue across difference: Practice, theory, and research on intergroup dialogue* (p. 76), by P. Gurin, B. R. A. Nagda, and X. Zúñiga, 2013, Russell Sage Foundation.

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This framework and the research that informed its development are grounded in the traditional, in-person delivery of IGD, making it important to discern the ways in which these various intrapersonal and interpersonal processes and outcomes are fostered and/or hindered when IGD is delivered online. Thus, our interview protocol included questions that would provide participants opportunities to discuss the ways in which these various processes and outcomes may have been a part of their online IGD experience.

Current Scholarly Discourse on Online Intergroup Dialogue

Given that online IGD is a relatively new phenomenon, it has received considerably less scholarly attention when compared to the decades of research that has been conducted on in-person IGD. In our review of the literature, we found three publications that focus on online IGD, two of which center on facilitators' reflections (Bodon, 2021; Nagda et al., 2021) with the other focusing on students' perceptions (Jackson et al., 2024). Bodon (2021) describes her own experience creating and facilitating an online IGD focusing on immigration, including her perceptions of her participants' online IGD experience. Nagda et al. (2021) provide a compilation of similar essays in which they provide separate accounts of their own transition from facilitating dialogues in-person to facilitating online. Both Bodon and Nagda et al. present their online dialogic experiences primarily as examples from which readers can gain insights regarding their own work.

Jackson and colleagues' (2024) qualitative study of students' perceptions of online IGD participation focused on the ways in which the technological aspects of online IGD (e.g., cameras, displays, muting and unmuting, chat features, breakout rooms), as well as students' physical locations as they participated in online IGD (e.g., apartments, dorms) can both enhance and/or hinder IGD processes, outcomes, and the overall experience depending on how these aspects of online IGD are tended to and utilized. Similarly, their findings also illuminated ways in which the online implementation of IGD has the potential to both promote and/or hinder equal and equitable participation and experiences among participating students.

As a complement to these first steps into the scholarship of online IGD, this study focused on increasing our collective understanding of students' perceptions of the interpersonal and intrapersonal dimensions of online IGD (Gurin et al., 2013; Pettigrew, 1998; Zúñiga et al., 2007), which, in turn, can illuminate practical recommendations for enhancing online IGD and provide insight regarding future research and theory development. To gain these insights, we interviewed students who had participated in online IGD, as described in the following sections.

Methods

Research Design and Paradigm

Given the nature of our research question, we conducted semi-structured interviews as part of this qualitative, phenomenological study. Phenomenology focuses on individuals' lived experiences of a phenomenon (in this case, the online IGD experience), which is explored "with a group of individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 76). In providing participants opportunities to relate their own experiences of online IGD through the interview process, our research efforts were grounded in social constructivism, a paradigm that centers on the development of meaning and knowledge through the complexity and diversity of individuals' lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moring, 2001).

Sample

The sample for this study was purposeful, given our need to interview students who had participated in online IGD. Participants were interviewed after having completed an IGD course at one of three U.S. postsecondary institutions. Though these courses were led by different facilitators at different institutions, each of the IGD courses represented in this study aligns with

the “Michigan Model” of IGD (described previously), meaning that the participants in this study experienced the same dialogic approach and pedagogy.

Participants were recruited via a survey that they completed as part of a separate study of intergroup dialogue (i.e., they were asked at the end of that survey if they would be willing to be interviewed as part of the present study). This recruitment resulted in interviews with 16 students, all of whom were undergraduates who participated in synchronous IGDs that were either fully online (via Zoom) or blended (i.e., some weekly sessions via Zoom, some sessions in person). Table 1 provides additional demographic information for the sample.

Table 1

Select Sample Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	Race(s)/ Ethnicity(ies)	Institution	IGD Semester	IGD Format
Amber	Woman	African, African American	C	2021 Fall	Blended
Angela	Woman	White, Latinx	C	2021 Fall	Blended
Avery	Woman	Asian American	C	2021 Spring	Fully Online
Bailey	Genderqueer/ nonconforming	White, Middle Eastern	A	2021 Spring	Fully Online
Crystal	Woman	Black	B	2021 Fall	Blended
Daniel	Man	Asian, Asian American	B	2021 Fall	Blended
Jessica	Woman	White	B	2022 Spring	Fully Online
Justin	Man	African, African American	C	2021 Spring	Fully Online
Kayla	Woman	White	C	2021 Spring	Fully Online
Molly	Woman	White	B	2022 Spring	Blended
Nicole	Woman	White	C	2021 Spring	Fully Online
Robert	Man	White	C	2022 Spring	Blended
Talia	Woman	White	C	2021 Fall	Blended
Tara	Woman	Asian	C	2021 Spring	Fully Online
Tyler	Woman	White	B	2022 Spring	Fully Online
Whitney	Woman	White	C	2021 Spring	Fully Online

Note. $n = 16$.

Data Collection

The lead researcher conducted 45-60-minute, semi-structured interviews via Zoom with each student who had consented to participate in the study, utilizing an interview protocol that was designed to illuminate participants' overall perceptions of their IGD experience, as well as the opportunities and limitations they felt came with its online delivery. At the beginning of each interview, the lead researcher introduced himself, summarized the purpose of the study, confirmed that the participant had indeed participated in (and completed) an online IGD, and asked the participant if they would like to ask any questions before moving on with the interview. The development of the interview questions was guided by our review of the IGD and intergroup contact literatures (discussed previously), inviting participants to share their perceptions of the ways in which the online nature of their IGD experience promoted and/or hindered Allport's (1954) and Pettigrew's (1998) conditions of intergroup contact and the various pedagogical, communicative, psychological, and intergroup processes and outcomes that comprise the critical-dialogic theoretical framework of intergroup dialogue (Gurin et al., 2013; see Figure 1). For example, participants were asked to describe their perceptions of the ways in which the online nature of their IGD experience helped promote and/or hinder their desire and ability to develop relationships with their group members (i.e., friendship potential; Pettigrew, 1998) and to work through conflicts that emerged in their IGD experience (i.e., communication processes, cognitive involvement; Gurin et al., 2013; see Figure 1). In addition to asking questions that were more explicitly grounded in these theoretical considerations, the interview protocol also included more practical questions related to the features of Zoom (e.g., breakout rooms, chat, cameras, microphones) as a complementary way of discerning the opportunities and limitations associated with the various conditions (Pettigrew, 1998), processes, and outcomes (Gurin et al., 2013) associated with intergroup contact and dialogue. At the end of the interview, participants were asked if there was anything else they would like to share about their online IGD experience.

Data Analysis

To analyze participants' responses, we used an open, axial, and selective coding approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to enable "a cyclical and evolving data loop in which the researcher interacts, is constantly comparing data and applying data reduction, and consolidation techniques" (Williams & Moser, 2019, p. 47). Through this dynamic process, themes were identified and interpreted, as guided by the study's theoretical grounding and research questions. The research team coded the responses individually in the open coding phase. Thereafter, we met and discussed the themes that emerged in the data until saturation was reached as part of the axial coding phase. We then coded all data using a selective coding approach. Following the coding, we met to discuss the selected themes and coded excerpts as additional steps to ensure intercoder consistency (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). Our resulting coding scheme consisted of codes that were guided by terms and constructs in the IGD literature (e.g., "friendship potential") along with original codes developed by the researchers individually and collectively (e.g., "feel safe behind a screen").

To further establish trustworthiness and reliability in our data collection and analysis efforts, we triangulated our analyses by having each member of the research team involved in coding and the cross-checking of codes (Patton, 2015), and we provide thick, rich description and interview excerpts in our finding sections below (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Member

checking was also used to establish trustworthiness and reinforce the narrative co-construction of meaning (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Findings

Our analyses of the data illuminated a range of perceptions of online IGD, including ways in which online delivery can help foster and strain the kinds of conditions (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998), pedagogy, and intrapersonal and interpersonal processes (Gurin et al., 2013) associated with productive intergroup contact and dialogue. Specifically, students discussed ways in which participating in online IGD “behind a screen” influenced how they engaged with (or disengaged from) both their peers and their own identity-related reflection. Students also described how participating in IGD online influenced their ability to develop relationships with their IGD group members. These themes are described in greater detail in the following sections.

Students’ Experiencing Safety (or Comfort) “Behind a Screen”

One of the most prominent themes that emerged from our interviews was the practical and emotional buffer that students’ screens provided. Students discussed behaviors that they were enabled to do (or not to do) because there was a screen between them and their IGD peers, which represents an important set of opportunities and limitations associated with online IGD. That is, it became clear that what they were describing (summarized hereafter) could be seen as an opportunity or limitation depending on whether students were using this “buffer” as a way to pursue safety or comfort.

In IGD, and in inclusive teaching, generally, the distinction between students feeling safe and students feeling comfortable is important (Gurin et al., 2013; Weaver et al., 2021). On the one hand, students should feel and be safe from all forms of harm. On the other hand, learning, unlearning, and development can be uncomfortable as students learn about and make sense of difficult realities. For example, students in this study described how one can always just turn off their camera if things get heated or emotional (Angela, Avery, Crystal, Daniel, Justin, Tara, Tyler), with Daniel suggesting that “online, I could easily turn off my camera and like, I don’t know, punch [a] pillow or something if I was angry . . . but, obviously in person, I would have to kind of keep that to myself.” Along these lines, Tyler (a woman in a gender IGD) felt that it was easier to express emotions online because she could “kind of retreat after” by muting and, “as far as I know, nobody was still looking at my screen after I shared.” She also highlighted how having a screen between herself and her peers influenced how she talked about gender and her past experiences with her peers:

We’ve been socialized as women to be quieter and kind of defer to other people. And I find it easier to shed that when I’m online because I’m the same size as everybody else. I’m taking up the same space on the screen, but in person, that’s not the case . . . there are certain things that I felt more comfortable sharing about, like sexual assault and harassment that I probably wouldn’t have felt as comfortable sharing in person . . . I also felt it helped me not sugarcoat certain opinions as much because I didn’t see any men right in my space or in the room. So, I felt more comfortable, kind of like calling out certain behaviors that probably some of these guys engage in.

In these students' observations, we can see how if such steps are taken in the name of safety (as was the case with Tyler), they represent an opportunity that is difficult to replicate in person. We can also see how such behaviors (e.g., avoiding heated or emotional moments) can also highlight a potential limitation of online IGD if students do them as a way of avoiding the kinds of discomfort that promote learning and development.

The online platform influenced other emotional dynamics as well. Robert shared that experiencing IGD online "made it have a little less emotional gravity" and that, if there was an emotionally charged moment where no one knew what to say, "I could kind of just stare off into space for a second or, like, stare at the document up on my screen." Similarly, Kayla felt:

Having the screen lets a lot of . . . the uncomfortableness of the conversations we were having . . . it kind of buffered that conversation and made it so we could just sit in silence for five minutes and then we were like: "Okay, no one is going to talk."

Conversely, when those moments happened in person, Robert felt that he "could kind of feel the people around me feeling what I'm feeling, feel that kind of like silence in the room." This connection to (and the relevance of) the feelings of nearby peers is also discernible in Justin's thoughts on crying:

If I share something personal, it would be a lot easier for me to, if I'm feeling I want to cry, hold back the waterworks or whatever if I'm online. Whereas, if I'm in person, I can't explain why, but I feel like it would be a lot harder to hold back that emotion.

Here again, the ability of an online platform to help students "hold back the waterworks" can be seen as a benefit or limitation depending on whether it is promoting student safety or comfort, and the ways in which it is promoting or hindering dialogue between students.

Having a screen between students and their peers also influenced how students navigated controversy. On the one hand, the screen was seen as a way to say more controversial things, as summarized by Molly:

In person, if you say something controversial, I don't even know what it is necessarily, but you kind of have to own it. Whereas, on Zoom, you could say something, you say something offensive or controversial, and then when the two hours is up, you just close your computer, and then next week you open it again and you never have to, like, be face-to-face with your peers. Whereas, in person . . . people would feel more, like I said, vulnerable in person.

On the receiving end of controversial statements, students discussed how they would respond differently to things they disagree with. Regarding online IGD, Kayla said that hearing things she disagreed with would "make [her] want to be more distracted." Elaborating, she said

I don't really like to directly oppose people, or I don't really know how to do that yet, I guess. So, I'd either withdraw from the dialogue, or I'd get more engaged and just be in my own thoughts more instead of participating verbally.

When asked how she would respond in an in-person IGD, she said, “I think, eventually, I would go to a leader and be like, ‘Hey, I really want to learn how to constructively dialogue about a point that I want to oppose.’” When asked why she wouldn’t reach out to a facilitator in an online IGD, she felt that

It was just another email I had to send in another Zoom that I had to be on. And, at that point, it was just a lot of the same, just repetitive being on the screen. So, I think that was a big reason that stopped me from reaching out, which is unfortunate, but I think if it were in person, and I could just go up to my leaders after class and be like, “Hey, I need some more help with this,” then I would have just done it.

In Kayla’s comments, we see how having a screen between students and their peers can offer them distractions in moments of disagreements, and how having to go through a screen to connect to facilitators can motivate students to avoid or pass on opportunities for learning and development. Again, if students finding distractions during disagreement offers students a sense of safety, it can represent a benefit afforded by online IGD; if students take such steps to avoid effort or discomfort, it can be seen as a limitation.

Having a screen between students and their peers also influenced other interpersonal aspects of the IGD experience. For example, Amber indicated that her group had their cameras off throughout much of their IGD experience, highlighting how “when you’re online and your camera isn’t on, you can do whatever you want” (i.e., even to the point where people might have been so physically removed from the dialogue that they weren’t in a position to speak into their microphone). Even when cameras were on, which was the norm among those we interviewed, Robert felt that there was less opportunity for affirmation:

I didn’t feel affirmed at all by the people around me, even if they were in agreement. I feel like my passion for the moment didn’t get affirmed at all on Zoom. You’d have another person jump in right away, and then people would be visually engaged in whatever that was.

Students also highlighted how they can have more control over what they see and what others see of them. Tara shared how being able to see herself made her feel more comfortable reading her testimonial:

If we were in class, and I was standing up and reading it in front of the class or something, I think I would have been even more scared or more stressed than I was over Zoom. So, I kind of felt like sometimes having that barrier where like, you see what everyone’s looking at, and you can kind of control that, was kind of nice for me, personally, because it made me feel more comfortable in being in the space.

Whitney pointed out that, when reading her testimonial, she could only look at one screen at a time, which allowed her to look at her testimonial document (only), to the point where “it was like I wasn’t talking to anyone.” She also highlighted that, on Zoom, “we kind of didn’t look each other in the eyes or anything,” noting that “being online definitely has that added layer of

kind of being able to say all of it without really having to face everyone, which I don't know if that's good or bad." Here, Whitney highlights how, when students look into the eyes of their peers on Zoom, the others are unable to detect it (i.e., it will appear that they are looking elsewhere). However, if a student were to stare into their own camera as a way of helping their peers feel that they were being looked at directly, that student would actually only be able to see their peers peripherally (because they are staring at their own camera). In this sense, Whitney's comments remind us that Zoom does not enable students to look each other in the eyes, while also reinforcing one of the primary themes that emerged in this study (i.e., "I don't know if that's good or bad").

However, there were ways in which having a screen between students and their peers hindered intrapersonal dimensions of the online IGD experience, such as students' identity engagement (see Gurin et al., 2013). Robert, a white man who participated in a blended IGD, explained that

being online meant I had to face far less emotional topics, or topics that actually made me process my privilege. Then, in person, it wasn't forced, but I think the in-person nature of it created a direct confrontation with those identities more than online.

He later explained that being online "allow[s] you to avoid a lot of other things that compounds into processing identity as well." Molly (a white woman in a blended IGD) suggested this as well, while also highlighting how this kind of intrapersonal processing can influence not only long-term development within students, but how they engage with their peers in their IGD over the short-term:

When we moved to in-person, I became a lot more quiet . . . I just felt so much more vulnerable in person, and I felt like I shouldn't speak up . . . I should let my classmates speak up just because [our IGD was] about race. And I think that I gave a lot of room for my Black classmates, my Hispanic classmates, to speak when we were in person, whereas online I felt like, 'Oh, like I'm just behind a screen, I'll just speak up. Like, it doesn't matter.' But when I was in person, I was like, 'Oh my gosh, I'm one of the only white, blonde, blue-eyed girls. I should shut up and just let everyone else talk.'"

Here, Molly highlights how physical proximity influences how she engages with her own identities (an intrapersonal process) and, consequently, the ways in which she interacts with her peers (an interpersonal process).

A Lack of "Friendship Potential"

Students also discussed how a lack of physical proximity influenced their ability to form deeper relationships with their IGD peers. Research has found the potential for friendship to be an integral condition of positive intergroup contact (Ball & Skrzypek, 2022; Pettigrew, 1998). This does not mean that everyone involved in intergroup contact must become friends, but it does highlight the importance of people having a quantity and quality of interactions that can promote relationship development (Miles et al., 2015). Aside from the more formal, course-related interactions that students had as part of their IGD, one of the most prominent themes that emerged from our interviews was an absence of the personal connections and relationships that

students felt can be developed outside of class. Almost every student mentioned their longing for “small talk” and “little interactions” (Robert) that were seemingly not possible in Zoom. It was outside of class where they needed to “get to know each other as . . . potential friends . . . instead of just students in the same class” (Avery). Being on campus and “hanging out with everyone at once” (Whitney) was seen as instrumental for connection.

Furthermore, students discussed how their interactions with their classmates were confined to their time on Zoom: “[There was] no way to go off and talk to someone personally at the end of class” (Jessica). When the class was over, that was the “time to log off and not think of those people anymore” (Tyler). The demarcation between life and school gave rise to a narrow group identity: “We had a collective identity in class, but . . . when the Zoom call ended, our group identity ended, and when the Zoom call started, that’s when it started” (Tara). Some students (who lived near each other) were able to interact outside of class, others were not. Avery discussed how it was difficult to hear that one of her IGD classmates

worked at a coffee shop nearby, on campus, and [other classmates] were able to go and hang out for a couple hours and get to know each other more. But I was [living out of state] doing things. I don’t know, I just feel like when you meet together, your peers can be a part of your life more easily, but over Zoom, you don’t really know where they’re going after, or where everyone comes from before class.

In addition, some students expressed that they were not willing to take the “extra steps” they felt were necessary to have the kind of informal “small talk” that can cultivate relationships: “Because things were online, like, I’m not going to private message anyone. I’m not going to unmute myself to talk to people, so there’s no way really of making that connection” (Amber).

Not everyone was pessimistic about the friendship potential, noting that online experience simply made it more difficult, requiring more work. Angela remarked, for instance, that “making personal connections on Zoom may just take longer and is dependent on the participants in the room.”

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to discern dialogic opportunities and limitations of online IGD. Our interviews and subsequent analyses of students’ responses were grounded in and guided by scholarship associated with intergroup contact (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998) and IGD (Gurin et al., 2013; see Figure 1). In analyzing students’ responses to our interview questions, and in line with previous online IGD research (Jackson et al., 2024), we found that dichotomizing the various features of the online IGD experience in terms of opportunities or limitations, while a useful starting point for this study, ultimately, over-simplifies the assessment of online IGD. Thus, in our description of the findings, we highlighted the ways in which a particular aspect of online IGD can represent and provide both opportunities and limitations. These collections of opportunities and limitations have a variety of implications for IGD theory, practice, and research, as discussed in the following sections.

Theoretical Implications for (Online) Intergroup Contact and Dialogue

Intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998) posits that, for positive intergroup contact to take place, there must be (a) equal status among groups, (b) group cooperation, (c) a common goal, (d) approval of authorities for groups to interact, and (e) friendship potential. In this study, students' descriptions of their online IGD experience raise questions as to the extent to which each of these conditions were met, as well as a recognition of how the online delivery IGD helped promote these conditions.

While students did not provide any reason to believe that there was a lack of authority approval for them to interact, students did identify ways in which the online delivery hindered friendship potential and led to varying levels of investment and group cooperation among IGD participants. As for sharing and working towards a common goal, there were ways in which students' goals and motivations for enrolling in IGD surpassed their capacity to work toward those goals equally in an online context, both individually and collectively with their classmates. At the same time, the online delivery of IGD provided more equal access to students who would have otherwise not been able to participate (e.g., Avery, who lived out of state), and there were ways in which online delivery helped students more equally engage in the dialogic experience and overall purposes of IGD, given that they were not in the same physical space as their classmates (making them feel safer and more willing to be vulnerable).

Looking beyond the conditions necessary for positive intergroup contact, the critical-dialogic theoretical framework of intergroup dialogue (Gurin et al., 2013) (see Figure 1), provides a useful lens for analyzing the online IGD experiences students described in this study. For example, we see ways in which the online delivery of IGD both enhanced and hindered the structured interactions and activities that students experience. We also see ways in which students were more and less willing and able to engage in dialogic communication. In addition, students described how not being physically near someone can make it easier to not engage and work through one's own identities and corresponding privilege (i.e., identity engagement, a form of cognitive involvement). As for the affective and emotional dimensions of IGD, emotional disengagement was a prominent theme in our interviews, as was the limited ability to form substantive relationships or friendships.

Pedagogical Implications for Intergroup Dialogue

It was evident in participants' interview responses that many aspects of online IGD could represent opportunities or limitations, depending on a variety of factors. Thus, in the sections that follow, we offer recommendations as to how IGD facilitators and participants might, on the one hand, take full advantage of the opportunities afforded by the online delivery of IGD while, on the other hand, avoid its limitations.

Cultivating "Friendship Potential"

Online learning scholars have long emphasized the need for online instructors and students to be thoughtful and proactive in mitigating the "transactional distance" that can be accentuated in online learning (Moore, 1973; Moore & Kearsley, 1996; Orcutt et al., 2024; Stein et al., 2005; Ustati & Hassan, 2013; Weidlich & Bastiaens, 2018; Xiao, 2024). Moore (1991) describes transactional distance as "a distance of understandings and perceptions, caused in part by the geographic distance, that has to be overcome by instructors, learners and educational

organizations if effective, deliberate, planned learning is to occur” (p. 2). Though participants in this study shared a variety of ways in which online IGD helped facilitate the kinds of authentic and personal interactions that have been found in previous studies of IGD (Jackson et al., 2024; Gurin et al., 2013) and online learning (Mehall, 2020), one of the most prominent themes of this study was students’ desire (and struggle) to engage in the kinds of informal “small talk” that can often happen before in-person classes, during breaks, and after class. Such interactions help decrease transactional distance and have the potential to lead to other kinds of gatherings (e.g., at nearby cafés, restaurants) that help students and facilitators get to know, trust, and become more comfortable with each other (Hansen-Brown et al., 2022).

Though facilitators are rather limited in what students do outside of class, they can invite (not require) their students to consider establishing inclusive way(s) that students can connect with each other outside of class, perhaps one that allows for whole-group conversations as well as private messaging (for instances when students want to follow up with just one person) (Borowiec et al., 2021; Borup et al., 2020; McClannon et al., 2018). Facilitators should also be thoughtful as to when this invitation might be extended. For example, making such a suggestion on the first day of class may be too significant for a group of people who do not really know each other. In this study, many students expressed that the sharing of their testimonials was a turning point for the group, the point at which they began to trust each other. Perhaps after a session when the group seems to be becoming closer as a group, facilitators can suggest that they identify an inclusive way to connect outside of class, which can help them continue to foster the positive feelings and relationships they are developing.

Optimizing Cameras and Displays

As in Jackson and colleagues’ (2024) study of online IGD, students in this study illuminated how the more technical aspects of the online experience (in this case, Zoom features) can influence the more interpersonal and intrapersonal processes and outcomes associated with IGD. In describing their struggles to form deep relationships with their IGD peers, students in this study shared how being able to see everyone in their group was helpful along these lines, both in terms of having a screen large enough to see everyone’s Zoom “tile” and in terms of their classmates having their cameras turned on. The benefits of cameras and a sufficiently large display become all the more important as we consider how students struggled to read body language and the influence that this had on their IGD experience.

In the course descriptions for online sections of IGD, students can briefly be told (a) that they will need a camera and sufficiently large screen for the course (e.g., not a phone) and (b) where they can access or obtain such technology if they do not already have it. On the first day of class, facilitators can talk with students about web camera behaviors and best practices (Dennen et al., 2022), including the importance of keeping cameras turned on throughout the IGD experience, along with instances when it may be appropriate to turn one’s camera off (e.g., distractions in their backgrounds, the differences between safety and comfort in difficult conversations). Facilitators can also teach students how to adjust their Zoom displays so that they can see everyone and invite them to let the group know throughout the IGD experience if they are struggling to see the group in some way. In addition, facilitators can encourage students to position their cameras in such a way that helps maximize eye contact (as opposed to students looking off to the side), which can help give students the feeling that their peers are focusing on

the shared IGD experience, as opposed to multitasking. Facilitators can also be thoughtful as to when and why screens are “shared” in the platform, given that screen-sharing prevents students from seeing the rest of their group.

Facilitators can also encourage students to be mindful of their own facial expressions, given that (a) their faces are more visible in an online setting than in the in-person contexts they are used to and (b) that other forms of body language are inaccessible to their classmates (Cai et al., 2022). Facilitators should also be mindful of their own facial expressions, body language, and related behaviors, which can influence how students perceive them, students’ comfort in contacting them, and the overall course experience (Orcutt et al., 2024), given the prominent roles that facilitators play in IGD pedagogy. And, at the same time, facilitators can remind students of the importance of looking at their classmates (i.e., not just their own Zoom “tile”) throughout the IGD experience.

Directions for Future Intergroup Dialogue Research

Similar to other practical and scholarly efforts to better understand how to effectively implement IGD online (Jackson et al., 2024; Bodon, 2021; McCarron et al., 2020; Nagda et al., 2021; Yeakley, 2020), this study was exploratory with broad theoretical foci: Pettigrew’s (1998) intergroup contact theory and Gurin and colleagues’ (2013) critical-dialogic theoretical framework of intergroup dialogue (see Figure 1). While this study’s illumination of opportunities and limitations associated with online IGD can be useful in practice, the findings of this study also illuminate promising directions for future research that can further enhance scholars’ and professionals’ understanding of how IGD (and other IGD-like endeavors) can be optimally implemented online.

First, given the diversity of ways in which instructors can respond to the (potentially sudden or unexpected) need to teach online (Wingo et al., 2017), future studies can focus on the experiences and perceptions of facilitators who have facilitated IGD online. Specifically, researchers could interview facilitators who have facilitated both in person and online, and/or they could interview facilitators who have only facilitated online. The perspectives and experiences of facilitators who have only facilitated online would represent an important complement to the students in this study who, with the exception of one student who participated in a form of IGD as a high school student, had never been an IGD participant before. However, interviewing facilitators who have facilitated both in-person and online would allow for more direct comparisons between in-person and online IGD, which can be helpful in illuminating the various opportunities and limitations associated with online IGD.

Second, as a complement to students’ self-reported experiences in and perceptions of online IGD, observational research would help IGD researchers (a) more fully understand the particular phenomena that students discussed in this study and (b) identify opportunities and limitations of online IGD that may not be discernible through students’ retrospective accounts. Indeed, observational studies of IGD have been conducted previously (Gurin et al., 2013), which have provided IGD researchers and professionals with rare and unique insight into how IGD participants listen and speak to each other. Whereas those researchers videotaped IGDs in order to analyze them later, Zoom allows for simple and convenient recording. Further, if researchers wanted to observe online IGDs in real time, they could attend the online IGD with their camera

turned off, which allows the host to remove the researchers' tile from participants' view. Though participants would be aware of and consent to the presence of the observer(s), their invisible presence would help prevent the possibility that students would act differently because they know they are being observed.

Third, as a complement to such qualitative studies, quantitative studies could help IGD scholars and professionals assess the extent to which students are experiencing and obtaining IGD's intended outcomes. Such research would build on past quantitative studies of IGD that have analyzed the extent to which students engage in a wide range of intrapersonal and interpersonal processes and outcomes associated with interpersonal communication, emotion, cognition, and intergroup understanding, relationships, collaboration, and action (Gurin et al., 2013; Gurin-Sands et al., 2012; Nagda et al., 2004; Nagda 2006; Nagda et al., 2009; Sorensen et al., 2009). Such research would be useful in discerning the extent to which such processes and outcomes are likewise occurring in online IGD. Of course, the purpose of such research would not be to simply make comparisons between in-person and online IGD in order to determine "which one is better" (see Bernard et al., 2004). Indeed, scholars of online learning have long understood that the underlying questions of such research should not center on determining whether in-person or online instruction is "better" (Joksimović et al., 2015); rather, based on the understanding that both in-person and online implementation can be effective, the underlying research questions and purposes should center on how pedagogies (such as IGD) can be optimally implemented in person and online (Salomon, 2002). In this sense, quantitative studies of online IGD could help identify if there are processes or outcomes that are not carrying over in the transition from in-person to online IGD, how this might vary across students with different identities (Miles & Kivlighan, 2012) or levels of developmental readiness (Jackson, 2021), and, therefore, provide insight into adaptations that can be made as part of such a transition.

Fourth, while the findings of this study did not give reason to believe that previously identified conditions for positive intergroup contact (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998) do not apply to online IGD, this study does prompt us to consider what additional conditions may be necessary for positive intergroup contact in online contexts, given that Allport's (1954) and Pettigrew's (1998) conditions for intergroup contact were derived from decades of research on in-person group interactions (see Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006, for a review). Future research in this area can help discern such conditions, which will be critical to IGD programs, facilitators, and students striving to optimize IGD interactions online.

Finally, as a complement to this study, which was grounded primarily in IGD research and theories, the pursuit to better understand the opportunities and limitations of online IGD can be enhanced as IGD scholars further draw upon the scholarship of online learning. As just one example, the community of inquiry (COI) framework (Cleveland-Innes et al., 2024; Garrison et al., 1999; Shea et al., 2022) describes a set of components related to cognition, social presence, instructor pedagogy, and student learning that have been found to be integral to the online learning experience. These four components both align with and complement the psychological, communicative, and pedagogical components of IGD (see Figure 1), speaking more directly to phenomena that are unique to online teaching and learning. The online focus of such frameworks can help shift how IGD facilitators and researchers implement and study online IGD, how they interpret and make sense of the online IGD literature that is emerging post-pandemic, as well as

the kinds of topics and questions that will receive scholarly and practical attention going forward.

Limitations

Though this exploratory study is useful in discerning next steps in IGD theory development, practice, and research, there are limitations to this study that should be acknowledged. First, the sample consisted primarily of women (12 out of 16) who attended 3 institutions. These students also self-selected into this study, and it is possible that the experiences and perceptions of students who decide to accept the invitation to participate in such a study may not represent the experiences and perceptions of other students who were invited—but did not choose—to participate. In addition, interviewees had slightly different IGD experiences: The sample included students who participated in IGD exclusively online, as well as those who participated in a blended format (i.e., some weekly sessions online, some in-person), and the quantity of IGD sessions varied across participants as well.

In addition, the questionnaire was designed to ask a range of questions that were grounded in IGD theories and digital learning perspectives. As an exploratory study, the interviews conducted offered a breadth of responses designed to illuminate implications for practice and future research related to online IGD, rather than in-depth explorations of select aspects. Future qualitative studies that focus more in-depth on particular aspects of the findings presented in this study would be helpful in addressing such limitations, along with quantitative studies that can identify and further substantiate relationships through the use of larger datasets.

Conclusion

For decades, in-person IGD has been a prominent social justice pedagogy, bringing students together to dialogue on matters that are central to the intergroup conflicts taking place in the U.S. and throughout the world. In an increasingly digital world, it is important to understand how such pedagogical approaches and conversations can be optimized in online contexts.

The purpose of this study was to discern and better understand opportunities and limitations associated with the online delivery of IGD. The findings of this study highlight the importance of facilitators being able to, on the one hand, take advantage of the opportunities afforded by the online delivery of IGD, while, on the other hand, avoiding or mitigating its limitations. In this study, we have put forth a variety of such recommendations, and we have highlighted future directions for IGD research and related theory development that can help us better understand how IGD programs, facilitators, and students can navigate limitations of online IGD. Beyond IGD alone, such empirical, theoretical, and practical efforts stand to increase our understanding of how to prepare students (through online means) for life in a world that is not only increasingly diverse and complex, but increasingly online as well.

Declarations

This study was approved by the [institution name temporarily withheld for peer review purposes] Institutional Review Board.

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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