

Inter-Religious Dialogue Activity: An Experience among Undergraduate Students in Selected Universities in Malaysia

(Aktiviti Dialog Antara Agama: Pengalaman dalam Kalangan Pelajar Sarjana Muda Beberapa Universiti Terpilih di Malaysia)

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ABSTRACT

The study is aimed at exploring a few inter-religious dialogue activities among undergraduate students in the Department of Aqidah and Islamic Thought, the Academy of Islamic Studies, University of Malaya (JAPI, UM); the Academy of Contemporary Islamic Studies, (UiTM); the Department of Usuluddin and Philosophy, National University of Malaysia (JUF, UKM) and the Center for the Promotion of Knowledge and Language, University Malaysia of Sabah (UMS). There are many courses related to religious studies that are taught at these four universities. The lived-experiences of the participants were explored through inter-religious dialogue activities. A purposive sample of various students from the four universities mentioned above participated in this dialogue activity. The data were analyzed using an interpretive phenomenological approach, inductively in order to characterize the received data into respective themes. Hence, the results demonstrated that the lived-experience of the dialogue activities in inter-religious dialogue was characterized by the following: (1) the role of the environment, (2) the value of individual relationships through sharing and storytelling and (3) the experience and relationships among other ethnicities as well as family child-rearing practices. Thus, this study provides information concerning the various dialogue activities of inter-religious dialogue models and designs in universities in Malaysia and proposes that different models and designs of inter-religious dialogue rely on different types and goals. This study also recommends the significance of creating environments to foster inter-religious dialogue, expanding the formats of interfaith dialogue and increasing religious study through education and training.

Keywords: Dialogue activity; inter-religious dialogue; experience; models and design; universities

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini bertujuan meneroka beberapa aktiviti dialog antara agama yang dilaksanakan dalam kalangan pelajar Sarjana Muda dan antaranya yang terpilih adalah pelajar di Jabatan Akidah dan Pemikiran Islam, Akademi Pengajian Islam, Universiti Malaya, (JAPI, UM), Akademi Pengajian Islam Kontemporari (UiTM), Jabatan Usuluddin dan Falsafah, Fakulti Pengajian Islam, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (JUF, UKM) dan Pusat Penataran Ilmu dan Bahasa, Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS). Kajian ini merencami pengalaman penglibatan para pelajar dalam aktiviti dialog antara agama dan menggunakan kaedah persampelan yang melibatkan para pelajar daripada empat buah universiti tersebut. Data telah dianalisis dengan menggunakan pendekatan fenomenologi dalam usaha mengkategorikan data yang diperolehi kepada beberapa tema tertentu. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa pengalaman hidup hubungan antara penganut beragama yang merujuk kepada aktiviti dialog antara agama ini dipengaruhi oleh: (1) faktor persekitaran, (2) nilai hubungan individu melalui perkongsian hidup dan pengalaman berkongsi cerita dan (3) pengalaman dan hubungan antara etnik lain pada zaman kanak-kanak. Sehubungan itu, kajian ini mengemukakan maklumat mengenai bentuk-bentuk dan model aktiviti dialog antara agama yang dilakukan di (beberapa universiti terpilih) di Malaysia dan turut mencadangkan bahawa perbezaan model dan reka bentuk dialog antara agama ini adalah bergantung kepada kategori dan matlamatnya. Kajian ini turut mengemukakan cadangan pentingnya sikap kepedulian kepada suasana persekitaran untuk merangsang aktiviti dialog antara agama

dan juga keprihatinan terhadap memperluaskan format dialog antara agama dan sekaligus meningkatkan pengajarannya melalui pendidikan dan latihan kemahiran berdialog.

Kata kunci: Aktiviti dialog; dialog antara agama; pengalaman; model dan reka bentuk; universiti

INTRODUCTION

At the University of Malaya, inter-religious dialogue has been approached as a teaching and learning method in every subject that relates to religious studies. The skill of interfaith dialogue has been implemented as the subject matter especially in (IAEU3125/III2008), Islam and Its Relation with Other Religions, (III2005), Study of Religions and (IIQ2003), Comparative Religions. At University Technology of Mara (UiTM), the ethnic relation (CTU553) subject, is a compulsory course to all degree students which consists the elements of interfaith dialogue. While at the National University of Malaysia, the interfaith dialogue approach was applied as a teaching and learning technique for every subject in the religious studies module. Meanwhile, at University Malaysia of Sabah, the course titled Inter-Religious Dialogue was offered as an elective course to all students from various faculties since 2012.

Moreover, al-Qur'an also inspires inter-religious dialogue. This important point has been stressed in the curriculum. All people come from one God alone; regardless of ethnicity, nationality, or religious beliefs, and they are descended from one pair of parents; Adam and Hawwa, and extending from one exalted soul, *nafs al-wahidah*. In Surah al-Hujurat: 13; Allah states the following: "O Mankind, We (Allah) created you from a single (pair) of male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that you may despise each other). Verily the best honored of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you" (Surah al-Hujurat: 13). This verse indicates that there is no basis for racism, that all people came from one source, and that people should understand the differences and diversity of others and get to know each other for cohabitation. Furthermore, the Quran denounces the non-acceptance of unbelievers in other religions. It states; "O ye that reject faith! To you be your way, and to me mine" (Surah al-Kafirun: 1 & 6). It assured that Allah does not forbid you to deal justly and kindly with those who fought not against you on account of religion and did not drive you out of your homes. "Verily, Allah loves those who deal with equity" (Al-Mumtahina: 8).

Therefore, as the researchers and lecturers of the courses mentioned above as well as with forty undergraduate students from the four universities in Malaysia, we performed our inter-religious dialogue activity among the multi-ethnic society in Malaysia. We spent time among communities in Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Terengganu and Kota Kinabalu, where the communities consisted of Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Buddhist, Sikhs, and those of various Sabahan ethnicities such as Kadazan, Murut and others. This paper discusses the inter-religious dialogue activity within these communities to correlate the relationship and to strengthen the society of various faith communities, whether they are Muslims, Christians, Buddhist, Hindus, Sikhs or those from other ethnicities through the process of a dialogue activity that we called inter-religious dialogue activity. This paper based on the experience within communities from September 1, 2014, to December 20, 2014, and from February 23, 2015, to June 6, 2016 and 14 October 2017.

THE CONCEPT OF DIALOGUE

The word 'dialogue' in the Malay language means speaking, conversation in acting, or any form of speech and exchange of opinions, discussion, negotiation between two sides or openly related to an issue (Kamus Dewan 2005; Aemy Elyani et al. 2015). From the etymology aspect, dialogue is derived from the Greek word 'dialectic' which means discourse or treatise; (Reese 1996) which is a combination of the word 'dia' which means 'through' and 'logos' which means 'word' (Forward 2001:12). According to Rahimin et al. (2011), a dialogue involves the elements of encounter, communication, agreement, comprehension, connection and collective understanding. Azizan (2008) on the other hand, states that the word dialogue, comes from the root word 'dia' which means through what is being said (logos), to produce what is hidden or implicit, which is the basic/reality of what actually exist at that time, which is actually absolute in nature. In other words, dialogue is a way for us to make explicit what is implicit. The idea and fact of history, culture and environment, does

not have any reality or impact on its own, because all of that should be dialogued. Dialogue is not only negotiation or polemic, where the members of polemic may consider dialogue partners as on the wrong and their existence as threatening. The responsibility or purposes of polemic members are to listen to the truth which may be bitter.

In Arabic, dialogue is ‘*al-hiwar*’, which refers to its etymology from the letters ‘*ha,wau,ra*’. Ibn Manzur in his book *Lisan al-Arab* defines *al-hiwar* as ‘*al-ruju*’, which means ‘to return or referred to’ (Khadijah & Khairul Nizam 2005). In fact, *al-Quran* which is the divine revelation and originally *kalam nafsi* which reached human in the form of *kalam lafzi* through Prophet Muhammad, with the angel Gabriel as intermediary, is part of divine dialogue to the whole of mankind. Quranic phrases in forms of *amr* (command) through the *qul* (say); or in form of interjection “ يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا ” (O those who have believed), “ يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ ” (O humankind) and “ يَا أَيُّهَا النَّبِيُّ ” (O prophet) are forms of dialogue (Ramli 2008).

Based on linguistic meaning of dialogue, the term dialogue such as been formulated by Muhammad Yusuf et al. (2015) should include matters related to conversation, discussion, conference between two sides or more, which usually happens in a formal and planned situations. In the implementation of dialogue, differences exist in terms of opinions, views, and ideas with regards to matters discussed between various sides. Nonetheless, despite the differences, the dialogue is maintained with an open, controlled and mutual respect.

According to Swindler (2003), dialogue is discussion about something between two or more sides of different opinions with the main aim of each sides learning from the other so that they may change and progress. In another discussion, Swindler states that, “learning more truth about the subject from the other” (2008). According to Mohd Farid (2008) this definition highlights a number of important characteristics and preliminary assumptions of dialogue. Firstly, a dialogue originated from differences of views. Secondly, it does not only require understanding between those involved, but also necessitate changes in opinion and sometimes, beliefs. Thirdly, in most situations, dialogue is a reaction towards problem and crisis, or pragmatic in nature. Swindler (2003) further states that the real concept of dialogue is not limited to representatives of religions who are experts in a certain field, but dialogue should involve all levels

of the society. Only through this approach that the idealism of dialogue can be expanded, when there is awareness to understand and learn from others. Based on this, the landscape of dialogue differs according to societal context and common issues (Heidi Rautionmaa & Arto Kallioniemi, 2017). Bergout (2008) describes dialogue as an effort to mature a person’s awareness. It is a dialectical process that transfers the attitude of ‘rejection’ into ‘agreement’, and carried out in the spirit of sharing and mutual respect and sincerity in communication.

Dialogue is a new way to understand life because through dialogue, be it formal or informal, network of acquaintances can be built. Through this acquainting process, it is hoped that members of the society from different religions and cultures can avoid or improve stereotype images of other sides or civilisation. The practice of dialogue if carried out continuously is able to cultivate the awareness and willingness to accept elements that exist in other civilisations (Muhammad Ridhuan et al. 2017). Acceptance of diverse elements from other races which has been shaped through the process of interaction, whether through the sharing of values, thoughts, institutions or humanity is very much needed to guarantee the progress of a civilisation. The goals promoted in dialogue practice, including justice, tolerance and harmony, are either underlined by values or are values themselves (Zurina et al. 2017).

Interfaith dialogue is one of the disciplines discussed in the field of Religious History and Comparative Religion. Hence, the approach of Comparative Religion is one of the alternative mechanisms in handling the conflict between Islam and other religions. This matter should be implemented so that this alternative approach will be apparent in the application of interfaith dialogue. The concept of interfaith dialogue can be traced its origins and development since the classical time until the modern era. *Encyclopedia of Religious and Spiritual Development* (2006) explains that the writing of interfaith and inter-philosophy dialogues has a long history and one of the most famous was the dialogue of Plato and the teaching method of Socrates that have been presented in the form of questions and answers. Interfaith dialogue, also referred to as inter-religious dialogue, is about people of different faiths coming to a mutual understanding and respect, allowing them to live and cooperate with

each other despite their differences. The term refers to cooperative and positive interactions between people of different religious traditions, (i.e. “faiths”) at both the individual and the institutional levels. Each party remains true to his or her own beliefs while respecting the right of others to practice their faith freely. Interfaith dialogue includes human interaction and relationships. It can occur between individuals and communities and on many levels, for example, between neighbors, in schools and in our places of work- it can occur in both formal and informal settings.

In a multi-religious context, dialogue refers to “all positive and constructive inter-religious relations with individuals and communities of other faiths which are directed at mutual understanding and enrichment in obedience to truth and respect for freedom” because dialogue promotes a positive perception of others. Furthermore, according to Fatmir Shehu (2014), the nature of inter-religious dialogue is very genuine. The reason is that; it promotes mutual understanding, peaceful co-existence, better understanding and humanity at large among different communities of different religions, ethnicities, cultural backgrounds and levels of education. Moreover, in all inter-religious dialogue activities, the rejection of exclusivism and the promotion of inclusivism may promote and sustain peace. Through the promotion of inclusivism, a climate of friendly relationships, where mutual understanding and respect as well as better understanding will prevail, - and will be created. In addition, inter-religious dialogue does not reject the exclusivism related to the fundamental principles of a religion. Rather, it rejects engagement promoting hostility, violence, and hatred. It is a fact that both Muslims and Christians, for example, engaging in dialogue, feel an obligation; that is, to safeguard the particular revelation that they believe came from God and to be loyal to their own faith and religious community. Indeed, similar to many Christians, Muslims have a fear of risking their faith if they enter into inter-religious dialogue. Therefore, to ensure that inter-religious dialogue activities go smoothly, Swindler emphasizes the ethics and principles of dialogue. The dialogue participants perhaps learn and change their attitudes, understand each other’s belief system and religion, and open room for mutual respect and better religious understanding (Swindler 1989). Moreover, in practice, in inter-religious dialogue activities, we need to limit the topics.

THE METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological study was to explore the lived- experiences of various students from three departments and one center from four different universities who had been participated in inter-religious dialogue activity related to courses in religious studies. The students came from various backgrounds, cultures, ethnicities and beliefs. They were Malay Muslim, Chinese Muslim, Indian, Chinese, Kadazan, Murut and other ethnicities. For the purposes of this research, inter-religious dialogue was generally defined as follows:

“A conversation between individual persons – and through them, two or more communities or groups – with differing views; the primary purpose of this encounter is for each participant to learn from the other so that he/she can change and grow and thereby the respective groups or communities as well” (Swindler 1995).

For the purpose of this study, the aim was to “explore personal experience and is concerned with an individual’s personal perception or account of an object or event, as opposed to an attempt to produce an objective statement of the object or event itself” (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The object or event in this study was the inter-religious dialogue experience. In addition, interpretive phenomenological analysis was connected to the concept of symbolic interactionism (Denzin, 1995), which focuses on how individuals construct meaning within their social and personal world. Willig (2001) said, “If we want to move beyond sharing an experience with our participants, and understand their experiences well enough to explain them, we need to be aware of the conditions that gave rise to these experiences in the first place”. To achieve the objective, we used models, and designs that we believed would lead to the effectiveness of inter-religious dialogue. (Miriam Therese Winter 2008). Therefore, we used conversation circles, field experience and storytelling as our models and designs in our inter-religious dialogue activities.

THE SCOPE OF INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE ACTIVITY

In reality, inter-religious dialogue comprehends topics and issues of various natures. In this activity of inter-religious dialogue, the participants may not

engaged in promoting violence and, hostility but be more concerned with leading the dialogue activity towards peace, mutual respect and harmony. Fatmir Shehu emphasizes that the scope of inter-religious dialogue does not cover theological issues related to the world's religions. Rather, it comprehends all aspects of people's live (Fatmir Shehu 2014). Gerrie Te Haar and James J. Busuttil (2005) stress four main elements concerning religion. They are religious ideas, which involve religious belief, religious practices, which involve ritual behavior, social organization, which involves the religious community, and religious and spiritual experiences, which involve psychological attitudes. Furthermore, the objective in inter-religious dialogue activities is to solve any problems with harmony, peacefully and without trying to convert those of other faiths or make others have doubts about their faith. Perhaps, in this activity, every participant may help others be concerned with and find a way to become better and improve their relations with one another, to make the world as a whole a better place to live (Fatmir Shehu 2014).

Therefore, the themes that are discussed by the participants in inter-religious dialogue activities should be of a diverse nature, given that such dialogue involves a diversity of people. Thus, the scope of inter-religious dialogue depends on the form and the dialogue participants' level of interest, understanding and knowledge. (Fatmir Shehu 2014; Muhammad Shafiq and Mohammad Abu Nimer 2007). Moreover, the scope of inter-religious dialogue activities should cover issues that will not create conflicts between the dialogue participants as well as the community within which the participants reside and in this contemporary society. They may engage with issues

that naturally increase mutual knowledge, lead to better understanding and decrease conflicts and tensions between religious groups (Fatmir Shehu 2014) as well as create a platform to share harmony, peace and mutual respect.

INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE ACTIVITY

In cultivating awareness of inter-religious dialogue and its importance among students, there are various activities conducted by University of Malaya (UM), the University Technology MARA (UiTM), the National University of Malaysia (UKM) and the University Malaysia of Sabah (UMS). The following are some of the activities conducted that give impact on students' experiences and conceptions on dialogue:

CONVERSATION CIRCLES AND FIELD EXPERIENCE

In JAPI, UM, UiTM and UMS, 'Inter-Religious Dialogue in the World of Difference' - was introduced as a main topic to undergraduate students for discussion. The structure of this activity was non-traditional, and it would be a team activity. The topic could well be described and explained as the difference in the world of dialogue; and it was divided into three two-hours sessions over 12 weeks of lectures and 2 weeks of conclusion lectures each semester.

Session 1: Explanation of self and how do the participants define inter-religious dialogue and harmony in your own words? In this session, all students had to get to know each other by sharing



FIGURE 1. Students' Circle Conversation Model in Religious Studies

their personal stories in the process of setting a framework for building community as well as describe inter-religious dialogue and harmony in their own words.

Session 2: Explanation of religion, and culture and how do the participants experience inter-religious dialogue and conflict issues among various ethnicities? The students shared basic information about their religion, culture, foods, beliefs, faith, spirituality, political context, and experience with other believers, facing conflicts and issues that relate to their faith and what these mean to them.

Session 3: What do the participants perceive that they learn or gain through participation in inter-religious dialogue activity? The students speak about their reflections on their cross-cultural experience and focus on what they learned.

Moreover, the students participate in field experience as another design element in teaching and learning religious studies. The students also pay a visit to a religious leader such as an imam, a priest, a *bhikkhu* and a *brahmin* and ask about their religions using phenomenology and the historical method to gain more knowledge from the primary sources. The lecturer and religious leader were considered a supervisor to ensure that the students gain knowledge following ethical procedures. The students need to share their experience within class by presenting their report, video and slide presentation.

Further, in the Department of Theology and Philosophy (JUF, UKM), a circle discussion or conversation circle was applied as a main task in

a religious studies module such as comparative religion, sociology and anthropology of religion and introduction to world religions. This circle group discussion was mainly divided into two different activities based on the course level and objective -for example, the religious studies module for undergraduate students in the JUF department was divided into two course levels; first, the introductory level, which offered a basic understanding of religion courses, and, second, the intermediate level. An advanced level was offered in postgraduate courses. For the introductory level, an activity called “a courtesy call to a religious leader” was carried out. Meanwhile, an interfaith workshop or field experience was conducted in the intermediate level.

A COURTESY CALL TO A RELIGIOUS LEADER

The name of this activity is quite different from the inter-religious dialogue activity involving field experience, and it has been implemented at JAPI. However, the purpose of the activity is almost the same. This activity was a compulsory task in the comparative religions course that was offered at the introductory level. Based on religious studies approaches such as phenomenology and the historical method, a religious leader such as an imam, a priest, a *bhikkhu*, or a *brahmin* shared many experiences in understanding his or her sacred text, history and practices. This activity was given to the student in week 6 of the one-semester course, immediately following textual studies in class. The main purposes of these activities were: 1), to study contextual perspectives about the issues (such as religious tolerance, religious



FIGURE 2. Students' Field Experience Model in Religious Studies



FIGURE 3. Field Experience - Subject in Religious Studies Module

pluralism, and religious extremism), which were discussed in class using textual analysis, and 2), to analyze the development of religious understanding and beliefs, their transformation or their changes from their authority sources, especially in the interpretation of teaching-phrases or quotations from sacred texts. These activities were performed by small groups of students (3-4 persons). The groups of students pay a courtesy visit to religious leaders (either; they are Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist or Sikh), all ethical and permission-related procedures are completed. After the interview session, the students have to share their report in class through a paper and a video or presentation.

An interfaith workshop is a main task for intermediate courses, which is offered for final-year students in the religious studies module. The

model bears a different name but has the same purpose as the field experience. The students have to form a group including Muslim and non-Muslim students. This group of students must conduct three sessions of discussions based on some themes such as theology, sociology, and current issues. As an intermediate-level course, most introductory topics such as doctrine, prophets, and the epistemology of religions had been discussed. Therefore, theological topics such as the second coming of Jesus between Muslim and Christian beliefs, the free will of humans, predestination, the human responsibility to nature, and the issue of good and evil can be a special focus and theme of discussion. These activities must be carried out under the supervision of lecturers from both religions and follow some ethical procedures.



FIGURE 4. Student's interfaith workshop

STORYTELLING MODEL

Stories are a matchless tool for inter-religious sharing and, thus, understanding. Storytelling provides the bridge for overcoming some obstacles frequently encountered in interfaith dialogue by opening the possibility for a different kind of conversation. (Eboo et al. 2008). Moreover, storytelling is a medium for the transformative learning of peace, promoting social reconciliation and intercultural dialogue. Furthermore, storytelling can be utilized as a tool of narrative truth-telling, aimed at restoring inter-personal relationships, healing from traumatic experiences and promoting social co-existence. This method can foster inter-religious dialogue as well as interfaith and intercultural dialogue. Further, it may contribute to the development of a culture of peace, in which the practice of peace storytelling with a member from 'the other' group can be interpreted as a desire to proclaim the 'unheard' voices and feelings to be shared with 'the other'. (Erna Anjarwati, Allison

Trimble 2010). It connects with actively listening to overcome prejudice, leading to a transformative learning process. Through storytelling, the students were given opportunities to share their lived experiences, affirm each other, and internalize new possibilities for expressing and working through both conscious and repressed thoughts and feelings together.

At UiTM, students who studying ethnic relations courses are exposed to interfaith dialogue storytelling activities. In dialogue program's participants who are from various ethnic and religious are given 20 minutes to present their religious and culture experience as such as Gawai Celebration, Wayang Kulit Festival, Eating Nasi Ambeng before Ramadan and others. Meanwhile, other students will ask related questions about the activities that had been presented. Teaching and learning this subject, facilitate students to understand the religions and cultures of other communities through directly from a dialogue with the practisers.



FIGURE 5. Students' Storytelling Model in Religious Studies



FIGURE 6. Students' Interfaith & Inter-culture in subject Ethnic Relation

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

This study explored the lived-experiences of students participating in interfaith dialogue in courses offered at the University of Malaya (UM), the University technology of MARA (UiTM), the National University of Malaysia (UKM) and the University Malaysia of Sabah (UMS). There are four models that have been discussed above; i.e., the conversation circle, an interfaith workshop or field experience, the courtesy call to a religious leader and story-telling as models and designs in the inter-religious dialogue activities. However, two models are almost the same approach as other designs. Therefore, we may conclude that only three main models were been applied in religious studies at the four universities. The researcher selected three models mentioned above with different names but almost the same in its approach in religious studies activities to allow the participants to tell their stories and experiences in their own voice. This voice, first individually, and then collectively, is used to identify common themes across narratives.

This study presents the three main themes that emerged through the classes and lectures. The researchers guided the students through a conversation on their definition, experience, and self-learning that occurred through participation in interfaith dialogue. The students are introduced by displaying a table of their demographic characteristics, brief biography, and their accompanying initial definition of interfaith dialogue, followed by the presentation of themes central to the lived-experience of interfaith dialogue. The students' experience participating in interfaith dialogue prior to university is varied. Some students recalled interfaith conversations from a very young age, while others did not have an understanding of what interfaith dialogue was until attending university. All of the students in this study reported having moderate to frequent extremely interfaith dialogue conversations during their studies at university.

All students are unique because they carry a different background and set of experiences. Throughout the initial face-to-face conversation in the conversation circle, interfaith workshop or field experience as well as wisdom circle and storytelling, the researchers observed various themes emerged that were central to the lived experiences of the students. First, the narratives suggested that the environment was a significant factor that set the tone for their experiences. Second, the focus on relationship building through sharing

and storytelling enhanced their experience, and the final theme was that the interfaith dialogue experience strengthened the participants' individual faith identity and religious or non-religious tradition. In the inter-religious dialogue activity, it start with difficult questions, allowing the proponents of opposing views to ensure that their position is known. The ensuing dialogue is in response to those positions. The students talk freely with passion, concern and also openly hear what other friends would like to say.

Facing one another made the conversations easier and evoked at sense of togetherness. The circle conversation emphasized that all students are equal and had an equal opportunity to contribute and to receive input from their friends. There was no dominant voice in the circular design. For 14 weeks together every semester in the inter-religious activity, relationships are established, along with the trust that these relationships implied. Furthermore, during the conversation circle, we implemented a wisdom circle that gave credibility to the substance of the relationships among the students. They ate together, listened to each other's theology, experienced spirituality and spoke out about any 'serious' issue without any judgment and bias.

Moreover, the students were also involved in 'spirituality and prayer' in the field experience approach to know more about every friends' praying and spirituality. They went to a mosque, a church, a *gurdwara sahib* (Sikh' temple) and a temple to observe and ask anything regarding to spiritual activity and learned about their culture, philosophy and beliefs from person who has credibility in his or her religion such as a religious leader; the priest, the imam, the *brahmin* and the *bhikkhu*. They also joined 'Ramadan *Iftar* (breaks) and *Bazar Ramadan* (Ramadan market)' and came to know better about Muslims' fasting. They shared this field experience during the circular design. In conclusion, the students appreciated each other.

In general, these activities had a good result in developing communication skills and an ethical process for different religious believers. Every student made an effort to have a good discussion and opinion in explaining the selected issues and topics based on his or her own religion. Further, each student discussed how the environment has affected to his or her experience in interfaith dialogue. Environment that was welcoming, comfortable and casual affected students' participation. The "circle" environments created a sense of reliance and belonging. Also, safety surrounding along

with a ‘circle’ that is full with respect, trust and honesty created a foundation for productive conversation. Experiential environments were fertile grounds for engagement in interfaith dialogue. The dialogue that occurred in the context of service activities added to the depth of the experience. In depth learning of religions were a fertile ground for meaningful dialogue. All of these aspects of the environment led the students to describe their experience in these environments as positive, hopeful, and peaceful. Spaces that were comfortable for the participants helped them fully engage in the lived-experience of interfaith dialogue. (Russel Krebs, Stephanie 2014).

Throughout the three models, i.e.: the circle conversation, the interfaith workshop or field experience and storytelling, the students were asked to define interfaith dialogue in their own words, express how they experienced interfaith dialogue, and describe what they perceived that they learned or gained through participation. In each of the three categories, the students described how the spaces between individuals guided their definition, experience, and learning in inter-religious dialogue or interfaith dialogue. The theme of relationships was stratified into relationships among individuals, the impact of sharing, and storytelling. Moreover, the students expressed that many relationships were initiated through sharing and storytelling. As the students described their definitions of interfaith dialogue, as well as their experiences, and what they learned through participation, it was clear that their encounter of experiencing the “religious other” actually strengthened their own faith. In accordance with the study by Liyatakali Takim (2004), to voice out the true identity of a religion, integration with the community of other religions is needed. Instead of weakens person’s faith, interfaith dialogue in contrary strengthen individual commitment and faith of their own religion as they are committed into portraying and conveying the true identity of their faith (Takim 2004). For some, this evolution began in their formative years; however, for most, the transformative experience did not occur until they were fully engaged in interfaith dialogue during their years of study. Through the broadening of their religious upbringing, having their faith challenged, and acknowledging the connection between their own faith or non-faith tradition and interfaith, the strengthening of their own faith occurred. (Russel Krebs, Stephanie 2014). Through the inter-religious dialogue activity, the courses

fostered an understanding of one another through information sharing and community-building action. Further, the courses provided opportunities for developing listening and communication skills in a multicultural context. The students developed better understanding of cross-cultural and inter-religious dialogue and the ability to participate meaningfully in multicultural conversations.

CONCLUSION

The results of this inter-religious dialogue activity have a variety of implications for the students, especially those in religious studies department and interdisciplinary faculty. The findings demonstrate that the lived-experiences of students are influenced by the environment, and that students’ focus on relationships leading to the strengthening of the participants’ faith or non-faith tradition. For students to have the opportunity to engage in these quality dialogues, educational institutions must devote resources—physical, financial and staffing—to develop and sustain interfaith dialogue programs. Doing so can only be achieved by creating a culture where interfaith dialogue is welcomed and embraced.

The university may create an environment that fosters, promotes, and embraces religious diversity, and interfaith dialogue. This means reinventing how interfaith dialogue programs are delivered, expanding from primarily curricular to co-curricular programs. It involves recruiting faculty and staff allies who are willing to increase their own religious literacy to provide a solid foundation to students. Higher education must evolve to embrace religious diversity at the same level as other areas of multicultural education. Creating a culture where deep dialogues of meaning and purpose are integrated into the university experience will permeate and create pockets of transformational learning on campus. Further, inter-religious dialogue activity is more likely to be authentic when there is more than a token presence, ideally and a balanced representation.

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ENDNOTE

- ¹ All human beings are greatly created with the body into which is blown an exalted created soul which is Allah attributed to himself for its gloriousness, (Surah al-Hijr:29), (Surah al-Tin:4).

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