Talking to white people about race: Conversations about structural advantage

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Talking to White people about race: conversations about structural advantage

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Introduction

Sheffield Hallam University is committed to race equality and is currently exploring issues of inclusivity, belonging, unconscious bias and differential student outcomes as strategic priorities. There is a need to discuss the impact of the structural advantages of Whiteness, but these topics are often difficult and uncomfortable to discuss. Our project aimed to start the conversation in a supportive and informed way and meaningfully address these issues. Colleagues within a large department, the Academy of Sport and Physical Activity, were supported through an intervention to raise their awareness of Whiteness, the insidious impact of White privilege on organisational infrastructure and to share pedagogic insights to feed into ongoing institutional work about race equity and eliminating the ethnicity degree awarding gap. After initial anti-racism development activities we wanted to support colleagues to make a step change in their understanding of structural advantage and White privilege.

Three of us worked together to facilitate the work and research: one racialised as of African descent from the Caribbean and two racialised as White. We had distinct roles in the university: an educational developer, the head of department, and the deputy head of department. We all worked at Sheffield Hallam University during the time of this activity. We carefully considered the process of engagement, the expectations of participants, and we sensitively developed the questions that we asked about the experience of reading the book.

To support colleagues in moving beyond their degree of comfort and into an place for bringing about change (Austen and Jones-Devitt, 2018), we used the book "Why I'm no longer talking to white people about race" by Renni Eddo-Lodge (2017) as a stimulus material that would be a suitable level of challenge for a group of academics new to the topic.

In this article we explain the process that we used, the main outcomes learnt, and our recommendations for educational developers making change in a challenging area of change.

Methods

Institutional ethics approval was gained (ER17401018) and signed informed consent were obtained in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. The participants provided written informed consent and were free to withdraw at any point. We built upon earlier work by colleagues which examined how to support challenging conversations about racism and critical Whiteness (Austen & Jones-Devitt, 2018).

Phase 1

At an all staff workshop we brought in expert colleagues to deliver materials and activities about anti-racism. At the end of the session we explained the study objectives and invited colleagues to take a copy of "Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race" by Reni Eddo-Lodge. 70 copies were made freely available for Academy of Sport and Physical Activity department staff

members. Books could also be obtained after the session for colleagues who wanted time to think about participating or for those who could not be at the session.

On receipt of the book, each participant was asked to engage in the following:

1. Read the book within a 3-month timescale
2. Offer insights in response to an email request following the 3-month reading time frame (Figure 1).
3. Volunteer to take part in a workshop at the end of the 3-month period to discuss thoughts and potential actions.
4. From the workshop discussions, identify the key actions for development and anti-racist action in the department

Phase 2

Participants were sent an email prompt (Figure 1). The purpose of emailing the prompts was to function as a check-in and reminder for participants, to allow participants the opportunity to reflect on what they had read, and to proactively create a sense of psychological safety to enable engagement in conversations which often challenged their own embedded belief systems.

We hope you have managed to read some or all of the book Why I'm no longer talking to white people about race by Reni Eddo-Lodge. I have attached the letter and information sheet to this email for your reference.

As part of the project we would now like to collect your initial thoughts about your pedagogic insights, or any insights that you wish to share, after reading the book. If you could email me by <date 2-3 weeks in advance of the workshop> as we will be using your anonymised and collated comments to inform the workshop. Your comments will be anonymised to ensure that they are not attributable to you in any way.

I hope that you can attend on <date of workshop>, but your comments will be invaluable regardless. If there is sufficient interest, we will look to run another session for readers who are not able to come on <date of workshop). Let us know your thoughts.

Figure 1. Email template requesting insights prior to the workshop.

We analysed the initial email responses using content analysis (Bengtsson, 2016) and shared the common themes as the basis of the workshop discussion.

Phase 3

A summary of the common themes from the email comments were shared with participants in the workshop as PowerPoint slides displayed on screen and presented with a full description by one the facilitators. After presenting the themes, participants were asked to form small groups of up to 5 and given A3 sheets with the following questions (Figure 2) printed on them. A note taker was nominated who took notes onto the A3 sheets.

Discussion Questions (in pairs/groups)
- What do you think of the overall approach as a method for engaging with concepts of racism?
- Do the thematic findings resonate with your thinking?

- What additional insights can you share from your experience?
- Why does it appear that taking direct and/or strategic action in this area is so hard?
- What pedagogic insights or actions can we draw from our conversations today?
- What do you think of additional pedagogic insights used within the wider sector (see example on table)? Would these work at this University? Are these relevant for this department?
- If you could only choose one thing to take forward, what would it be?
- Anything else you wish to add?

Figure 2. The questions discussed at the workshop

Content analysis was undertaken on the notes that had been scribed on the A3 sheets.

Outcomes

18 individuals, all racialised as white, took copies of the book and returned signed consent forms. Further individuals took the book but did not return consent forms and are therefore unknown). An additional 2 individuals withdrew from the study after taking books and took no further part in any activities.

All 18 consenting participants were then contacted to provide comments after 3 months. 7 participants returned email comments. 3 participants indicated that they had not yet had a chance to read the book. 7 participants did not respond. 1 participant responded that they had read the book and would return comments but did not eventually return comments.

Content Analysis of the emailed comments

The analysed comments were themed into 4 areas: discomfort and use of language, how to communicate about racism, the learning and understanding gained through reading the book, and taking action with a greater awareness and understanding of racism and structural advantage.

Discomfort and Language

- There was discomfort about the overall topic and the title of the book itself was described as divisive.
- The use of "language" was raised as a concern and feelings of being accused of being racist. Similarly worries about the use of "BAME" and "ethnic" as terms for people of colour.
- The scale of the "cultural problem" was often raised with concerns about other disadvantages and discrimination also being problems that should be dealt with. The scope and scale of the 'problem' was felt to be overwhelming.
- There was heightened awareness of the need for positive use of inclusive language in the classroom.

Communication

- The book could be used to start conversations with colleagues and/or friends.
- There is a need to create safe spaces for students and staff to talk about racism.

Learning and Understanding

- A positive feeling of being more informed and having an increased understanding.
- An increased understanding of institutional and structural racism.

- A heightened awareness of the 'whiteness' of background, experience, and privilege.
- Scientific and numerical subjects were seen as challenging to take an anti-racist approach to.
- Worries about perpetuating systemic disadvantage in the classroom.
- A need for us to seek to understand the historical context of racism.

Taking Action

- There is a challenge with taking positive action due to fear or overwhelm.
- There is a need for CPD about anti-racist practices.
- The department was beginning a curriculum redevelopment activity and many recognised that there was an opportunity to take an anti-racist approach to learning and teaching through curriculum redevelopment.

Outcomes of the workshop

Overall approach:

The participants of the workshop thought that the approach was sound, with the leadership approach being viewed as a positive. Reading the book was difficult and challenging for most colleagues and further support for the reading process would have been welcomed, e.g. small group discussions on specific chapters, and reading groups to work through the book. As an exercise in change management, it was suggested that relevant change management principles and practices should be considered for future interventions to maximise impact and change over time.

The book title was felt to be somewhat provocative, and this created reaction and conversation. This was mainly positive, but others thought it might be a barrier and act as creating a microaggression in colleagues racialised as White.

Challenges with taking direct action in this area:

- There was a general concern about the scale and complexity of the problem. Requiring everyone to be open minded, curious, keen, and willing to learn and adapt practice.
- Changes in staff culture are needed and colleagues need to be supported on a journey as anti-racist practitioners.
- More support centrally is needed with colleagues feeling that this should be a top institutional priority. Anti-racism work was seen as not being prioritised enough at university level.
- Colleagues wanted more time and space to talk about anti-racist learning and teaching approaches with less of a focus on metrics and more on the topic and talking about the topic. The data can fluctuate when students of colour numbers are low, and the issue still remains regardless of small numbers.
- Colleagues would welcome more space and time to keep the conversation going.

Pedagogic insights or actions:

- The challenge of creating safe spaces in the classroom was discussed and seen as a specific CPD need.
- Issues relating to formation of student groups for class-based, formative and summative tasks need careful consideration. Other issues of classroom management may need to be considered to avoid perpetuating biases and structural advantage.
- Colleagues wanted more anti-racist elements in all curricula, and support in how to do this meaningfully.

- Student demographics influence advantage or disadvantage in many ways, so colleagues wanted to develop compassionate pedagogical approaches. Ensuring that every student can bring something different to the classroom so we can all learn from each other.
- Colleagues wanted to increase their skill and confidence in ensuring teaching is actively anti-racist.
- It was recognised that academics often need more belief in the capability of our students. Awarding gaps are not representative of a student deficit.

Actions to be taken:

- Keep the conversations going.
- A consistent programme learning outcome about equality & diversity in all courses will provide a good starting point.
- The importance of resourcing this work with staff time, budgets, and CPD.
- The need to share practice and celebrate success.
- The need to learn from other universities who are making an impact in this area of work.
- Provide staff with ideas of changes to make, from simple changes like inclusive images in presentations to more complex changes in inclusive learning design.
- Develop vocabulary to challenge racism.
- Implement anonymous marking where possible to avoid any structural advantages.
- Question the background to science/knowledge and where the data/theory has come from (decolonise the curriculum).

Conclusion

Using the book as stimulus material was effective in initiating conversations about race in an non-confrontational but direct way. The key outcome from this was that the conversation moved beyond awareness to the changing perceptions that was evidenced in some of the feedback and discussions already noted. Although participants committed to reading the book over a 3-month period; some colleagues read the material quickly, and others had not read all of the book during that time, or had only just finished reading the book before the workshop. This had a negligible impact on the learning/engagement because it emerged that finishing the book was not critical to the success of the intervention, and the primary aim was to create a space for conversation about challenging topics and participants was achieved as those who had read the book could fill in gaps for those who had not.

The key themes through the email comments were about talking and sharing in a supported way. Having time to talk and being supported through conversations was critical to moving forward with action in a confident way. The email comments had given participants an opportunity to share their thoughts relatively privately and the anonymised content analysis meant that they could see their experience of reading the book had been shared with others.

Based on our experience of this intervention, we provide the following recommendations to guide this work.

Recommendation 1: Provide alternative methods of engaging in the materials such as audio book versions, or use shorter versions (podcast, summary articles etc.) for an adapted approach for shorter timescales or where participants are less likely to engage in reading a whole book.

Recommendation 2: Use an email prompt for insights and comments prior to meeting to create a content analysis to feedback to all participants and form the basis of the conversation. Sharing

common themes meant that initial conversations could be structured, and participants did not need to initiate the topics for discussion. It was a safe way to encourage participants to share and discuss.

Recommendation 3: Provide at least two opportunities to discuss the materials. One initial workshop to explore the materials together for the first time, and a second opportunity to revisit the materials. Two opportunities would allow for further thinking and reflection time to allow participants to fully explore themes that they found most challenging.

Recommendation 4: Encourage participants to commit to their own response to the workshop question "If you could take one thing forward, what would it be?" and revisit the personal commitments at a future session, giving support for action rather than checking adherence.

Recommendation 5: The convenors for the activities should be active and experienced anti-racist practitioners. They must be equipped to challenge while being sensitive. Facilitators may be of different ethnicities, but it should not be left only to people of colour to support colleagues racialised as white to learn about racism and structural advantage. The role of leaders racialised as white is as important as people of colour to lead discussions and facilitate spaces to ensure openness to challenge and change.

References

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