

Developing Anti-Racist Curricula: Reflections on three subject workshops held in 2022

Note: this is the transcript of a podcast that you can find on the Enhancement Themes website. It is intended to make the podcast content more accessible, rather than being read as a standalone resource. Minor edits have been made for clarity, but otherwise the text is verbatim.

Alison Eales (AE)

The Anti-Racist Curriculum Project is a partnership between QAA Scotland and Advance HE, with support from the College Development Network and sparqs. In session 2020-21, the project resulted in a Guide aimed at supporting colleagues in Scottish higher and further education to get started with this vital work. You can find the Guide on the Advance HE website. In session 2021-22, QAA Scotland hosted three workshops aimed at exploring how the resources might be used in the context of different broad subject areas.

This podcast is a recording of a conversation between the workshop facilitators, in which they discuss how they approached this work and what needs to happen next.

My name is Alison Eales and I am a Quality Enhancement Specialist at QAA Scotland. I'll let the three facilitators introduce themselves.

Peggy Brunache (PB)

Hi everyone. I am Peggy Brunache. I'm a lecturer in the history of Atlantic slavery at the University of Glasgow and I'm also the founding Director of the Beniba Centre for Slavery Studies at the University.

Saima Salehjee (SS)

I'm Saima Salehjee. I work at the University of Strathclyde. I'm a lecturer in STEM education for the last five years, and I'm very much interested in the anti-racist curriculum and so became part of the QAA workshop.

Stephany Veuger (SV)

I'm Stephanie Veuger. I'm a senior lecturer at Northumbria University. My area is cancer drug design, so I teach biomedical sciences, but I'm also Teaching Excellence Lead for my department, where I've got a real interest in areas such as decolonising the curriculum, and I'm co-lead for the Decolonising the Curriculum Network at Northumbria Uni.

AE: I began by asking the facilitators how they approached the design and delivery of their workshops, and more generally, how they encourage and support discussions about anti-racism in their subject areas.

PB: As a scholar and a teacher of a very difficult heritage - that is, the transatlantic slave trade and the history of Atlantic slavery - being a descendant of enslaved Africans and teaching this type of material to a predominantly white audience, I've found that walls tend to go up. Either it's 'I don't want to hear about it,' 'it's in the past, can't we forget it,' or, if they do

want to hear, there's so much shame and guilt that surrounds them it inhibits the ability to really get into deeper discussions about the legacies that are still inherent - the legacies of structural racism and other modes of oppression that are still inherent in our modern day societies. So for me, I thought to help break down potential barriers, walls, I wanted this to be a very interactive session, one that immediately allows people to engage with each other as well as with me in a manner that should hopefully make them feel comfortable enough to talk about something that's very difficult, whether it's because they don't understand, or they disagree, or they feel guilt and shame and don't know what to do. So I didn't want it to be a hierarchical situation of 'I know all, let me preach down to you and you embody this.' I wanted this to be far more almost egalitarian. Obviously, I'm the one running the session, but closer to egalitarian, where we can feel a bit more comfortable to discuss these situations.

SV: I think I was very similar in my approach. I'm aware particularly within STEM, within medicine, for example, when I teach, that as you say - you used the word 'comfort,' that people are often very uncomfortable, or worse, don't actually want to discuss a lot of these issues. So I wanted to come at it, again, in an interactive way, where I supported people in a very respectful way, getting them to really think about what respectful inquiry looks like by introducing that before the workshop, some principles around the way I wanted them to think and speak and listen to others. But then it was really about trying to encourage people to share their experiences - what they do know, what they don't know, what they would like to know more about. And as I say, doing that in a safe space, so constantly reiterating the point that you only share what you feel safe to do so. And yeah, I got a lot out of it. I think I got more out of it than I expected to, just purely by sharing some of the ideas with others. And one of the other things that I thought was quite important as well, which I'd actually taken from an EDI Change Agent workshop led by Advance HE, was reiterating to people that everybody has a 'why'. So even if you don't think you do, you do - it just might not be the same 'why' as somebody else. So starting the session by trying to just introduce that idea as well - even if somebody's 'why' is 'because the job necessitates it', it's something to get people to think about. So that's the way I went about it.

SS: A very similar approach in terms of self-reflection, and critically reflecting on their own teaching and learning, mentoring and leadership roles. My area is very much in STEM equity and inclusion, in terms of gender, race and intersectionality meeting. So, with this in mind, not only self-reflection. We - all of us - we also looked into giving [teaching staff] confidence to see their autonomy, that they can do it as well. It's not only the higher, senior management people who are supposed to implement it - [teaching staff] can implement this in their own lessons, in their own classrooms, in their own lectures, in their workshops. So I think my idea started off with self-reflection about what's happening around, in the macrosystemic kind of discourses, what's happening around. If these things are happening around, then why are we not incorporating or implementing it in our daily teaching or daily learning or leadership roles? So this was my main focus.

PB: One of the things I wanted to bring to everyone's attention, and just so that everyone felt comfortable with how hard this topic is, is first of all the changing nature of language, and what was okay to say and use 10 years ago, five years ago, may not be that right term to use now. And the fact that we're always in a process of learning how to better understand each other, better respect each other, better incorporate and challenge the modes of oppression that we're dealing with. Especially, as Saima was saying, they're interlocked, they're interlinked, happening simultaneously at all times. But that also means that while, for example, we began with talking about 'BAME', the term 'BAME': there are many, many people of colour who do not like that term, and then there are people who don't even like me to use the term 'people of colour' - they would rather say 'racialized minority' or something else. So again, finding out that there are those of African descent, those of South Asian descent, who may say 'you know what, BAME is fine with me', and plenty that say no, demonstrates that this is an issue or a set of issues that are constantly evolving, and

constantly changing, which means we are always going to have to work to better understand each other, and understand how do we create strategies that are anti-racist, and understand that the system can also use these terms against us. And the best example of that would be term 'woke'. It's now been co-opted in the most negative way by several kinds of people that certainly do not have my best interests, or anyone that looks like me, at heart. So, like Stephany and Saima, trying to use this interactive approach, but get people talking about why 'BAME' works or doesn't work now, but worked before, or did it ever, and what's the reason, and then trying to think about how then do we move forward and try to consider the complexity of these ever-changing environments in a way that we can start challenging - and, hopefully, dismantling - these structures of racism.

SV: I think I did something very similar around language and the ever-changing words and phrases that we use, and one of the things that I used to really focus on in my workshop was the term 'allyship'. And 'allyship' in itself - we could talk for hours around what that word means. Are there better words, like 'champion,' or other words that we could use? And in fact, I've had it said to me that the term 'ally' sounds like a word that you would use in terms of war. And I think I've had that said to me on more than one occasion. And so sometimes what I wanted to really get across in the workshop was that different language will be used, and at times what it's about then is just agreeing on the terminology that will be used in a particular situation, and taking that forward, and trying not to be too offended if somebody perhaps is trying their best and trying to do something. Agreeing on the terms that you're using moving forward. So it's really difficult.

PB: Stephany, that's really interesting, because the idea of seeing 'ally' as too closely aligned with terminology associated with war - I know plenty of people that would say actually, they don't like 'ally' because it's too passive. It's not active enough, and they prefer terms like 'co-conspirator,' that 'ally' is far too passive, and therefore does not demonstrate an active need to challenge and dismantle these issues.

SV: Yes. I think there's a lot to be done around discussing these terms and what it means to people, certainly.

SS: Just taking what Peggy and Stephany were saying in terms of terminologies, now I'm, for example, from an education background. We use big terms: 'decolonising the curriculum', or 'epistemic disobedience,' these terms, and it's in our day-to-day understanding. But when I was doing the workshop for STEM academics, or STEM professionals, they find it very difficult, because they then have to read all of the literature behind it. So I think, for us, it's very important that we make these terminologies as simple as possible. For example, in my workshop, there was Mignolo's work, and that paper is really thick. Even if someone in the area of inclusion will read it, it's a thick paper, there's a lot of theory in it. But then if you take a few basic themes, and put it in simple terms, I think that will not only give them some incentive, at the same time it will give them some encouragement, and it's not that difficult to implement. 'We have to read all of this, and then we need to implement.' No, it's *some* of the things that you can do. And one of the participants, I remember, was talking about 'decolonising the curriculum' and 'epistemic' - these are very fancy words. One way or other, in our pedagogy, we should be incorporating inclusive and equitable teaching and learning. So this is the main food for thought. I thought this was a very good comment from that participant.

PB: In wanting to not get bogged down with the ever-changing aspects of terminology, what I did was to demonstrate how terminology may change, but the underlying structures of racial inequity do not. And so, in some of my examples, I showed in the University of Glasgow itself, using student handbooks from the early 20th century, to mid-20th, mid to late 20th century, how there are pictures and terms that were used at the beginning of the 20th century that there's no question everyone knows you do not, you never draw Black people

this way, you do not use these terms. But then fast forward to 20-30 years later - the terminology has changed but the racial or the racist ideas behind them have not. And so that was one of the ways that we were working through - not just getting bogged down in the idea of 'well then what do you say, is it this word, is it that word', but just showing how even the change does not unfortunately dismantle the structures of racism, and that's what we really should be focusing on.

SS: You know, storytelling - I think that really helped, and the Anti-Racist Curriculum Guide has a lot of stories. And so rather than giving them, in my opinion, a lot of theories and all of this - which is good, which is required - at the same time, put scenarios and theories. It could be hypothetical, it could be real stories, anonymised kind of stories. It really helped in my session, and the sessions that I joined as well. So storytelling is something. We all tell stories every day, and we make our own stories. So I think this is one more thing that, if we incorporate it in our planning, would really help.

PB: Well it seems, Saima, our sessions were very, very similar because I also - well, we didn't call it storytelling. I interviewed a number of people that I know have had situations - unfortunate situations - at universities or other places of higher education, and just asked them to give me their experiences, some negative experiences. I included my own, too. Of course, with their permission, I did share the transcripts with groups in different breakout rooms, and then just had them have a discussion about it. Like: what would you have done if this person came to you with this story? And that's how we chose to tackle these ideas. So I didn't term it as storytelling, and none of them were hypothetical. They were all based in real-life scenarios.

AE: I then asked the facilitators what they hoped participants would take away from their workshops, and what practice they hoped would change as a result of the discussions that took place.

SV: I think the main thing is confidence. Confidence in themselves. I think a lot of people who turned up to my workshop were there just to know where to start. 'I really didn't know where to start.' And so it was nice to feel that perhaps they'd gone away with some ideas and things they could emulate, some things they could try out. I think that was the main thing that I really wanted people to take away.

PB: The main thing I wanted people to take away was that there needed to be a wider awareness and understanding of intersectionality - that some of the experiences of, say, a Black man would be different than the experiences of a South Asian woman, one who is disabled, another who is not cisgender. Those were some of the main points, and the other main point was to help people understand the difference between the term 'anti-racist' versus 'not racist.' That was, how active are you going to be to help dismantle these problems, and being careful to not engage in what I call 'knee-jerk activism,' which - as we know - everyone has seen examples of that, especially after 2020 and the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement. There was a lot of knee-jerk activism, as if this was a problem that only came about immediately, and can be easily dismantled, and fixed immediately, rather than understanding the deep structures of them.

SS: Just after the workshop I asked a few questions as a post-evaluation of the workshop, and one of the questions was: 'How did today's workshop impact, or not, on their self-realisation of [your] practice, and why?' And I'm going to share two very quick participants' responses, if that's OK. So one was: 'It helped to build self-realisation about my practises in raising my awareness of transdisciplinarity, and how I might think more about the role of non-academic forms of knowledge production in my discipline'. And another person said: 'I learned about initiatives colleagues are working on, and I can adapt in my area. I reflected on the use of language, terminology, and how sometimes even the

mainstream accepted language can be antagonistic'.

SV: I think that's a common thread. I'll read one of mine out. It said: 'I learned a lot, and really enjoyed the breakout room discussions. These were a very good way of hearing other people's perspectives and sharing knowledge and ideas'. So again, I think it's been about, it's that collaboration, and that talking to others, and sharing ideas is really powerful.

AE: Finally, the facilitators shared their thoughts on what needs to happen next, and how we can keep the issue high on the agenda.

SS: What we initiated, I think, was self-reflection, and their confidence, and they have to carry on with it. We used some of our Anti-Racist Curriculum Guide, but again, they have to adapt it in their own context. That also needs - and it's an ongoing process, it will be a long process - this also needs support, at institutional level, local level as well, Scottish level as well. So we need some kind of incentive given to the people who attended, and who didn't attend, as well. And some of the comments also talked about people who are reluctant to do that. There are people who are reluctant to attend these kinds of workshops. They're reluctant to open up, to delink, not only delink, but open up the discussion. They are reluctant. So how we are going to bring them in so that they start doing anti-racist curriculum, embedding anti-racist curriculum in their work as well? And one of the ideas was that we should have a senior management team involved in it. They should be attending these workshops as well.

PB: I've been thinking a lot about this, because I worry that we end up in some sort of whirlpool, and touching upon what Saima was saying, you know, getting bogged down in terminology, especially ones - words with 1500 letters in them that half the community can't say. What I've been thinking about is looking to make more links with activists in the community, who've been looking to challenge laws, policies and attitudes outside of higher education, and see what links, what strategies can we be learning, that may help to positively affect the policies and laws and attitudes within the University.

SS: I think we need to talk a bit about challenges as well, that our participants and we faced as well. One of the challenges in every workshop - I've been doing some workshops in my University as well at the moment - and in every workshop, one or two will come up: 'Well I was looking for a kind of toolkit. I was looking for a kind of step-by-step guidance'. So the overall idea of ARC needs to establish that we can't give you a toolkit. I'm working in an education department. I don't know much about what's happening in the School of Law, or what kind of content they teach. What we can do is just facilitate. So this is very important, and this is what QAAS talked about, is facilitation. We can facilitate, but it is the individuals who need to step forward. There's no 'tick box' kind of thing, there is no 'one size fits all' kind of thing, and it needs to be personalised, it needs to be individualised as much as possible.

SV: I completely echo that comment. Certainly in my department, and in some of the talks I've done elsewhere, I do find scientists are very focused on the 'how'. 'Okay, so you've said that, we agree on that, now what do I do, how do I do it?' And I think the word 'facilitating' is the important point there. It's about facilitating those conversations, and going back to the comment we made earlier about confidence, and then facilitating the confidence for them to try their own workshops or whatever it is they're going to do. I think that that really sums it up. It's very difficult, isn't it, to just tell somebody how to do it, because there is no one way - but it is what, often, I'm finding I'm being asked for. And so yeah, that word 'facilitating' is quite powerful.

PB: To underscore what Saima and Stephany have already stated, another reason why a 'one-size-fits-all' set of strategies doesn't work is because these structures of racial inequity, they're living machines. They're always evolving, they're always working to perfect itself.

So what may have worked and supposedly helped for the past has to change and readapt to their reaction. There was a point where it was about equality, but equality wasn't diversity. Then there was a point of having to bring in: 'We need more diversity'. 'Oh, well we brought people in, but they're not included.' So now we have to use the term inclusion, right? As well as equity. It's not just about equality, it's about equity. It's always having to make sure that in facilitating with ourselves and others, we understand that what may win the battle doesn't finish the war. These structures are always - they're alive, they're active, and they're always evolving to self-regulate and continue subjugating, marginalising, disenfranchising people.

SS: There were some conversations on challenges regarding resource and time. Everyone, the teachers who participated, and some of the EDI people who participated as well, they have a lot of workload. Time-wise, resource-wise, if they want to do some kind of research, for example - some kind of inquiry just to find out what is missing and how they can make it better, make the teaching or learning better - they don't have the time or resource for it. So this was one thing. But then one other person also talked about: 'Well, when this Covid or coronavirus happened, we changed almost our whole teaching, scenarios, everything, and we did it very quickly, we adapted the whole thing.' [The] anti-racist curriculum is so important, we need to embed it as soon as possible. There shouldn't be any waiting anymore. So all the workshops we did were self-reflection, and we tried to allow them to do some practice on some of those, but it's high time and it really needs to start moving on.

AE: Saima rounded off the conversation with this quote from one of her workshop participants that summarises why this work is so urgent and critical.

SS: The participant said: 'Definitely very relevant to all teaching and research and leadership in primatology. Colonial power structures are very present in what gets taught: what's teamed good science, what's a valid question to ask, whose work gets taught, who gets credit, who gets funds, funding for research, etcetera. It permeates everything'.

AE: We hope you have found this podcast useful. For more information on the Anti-Racist Curriculum Project, please visit enhancementthemes.ac.uk. Do get in touch if you would like to be involved in the project, or if you have been using the Guide resources.

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