

# Developing an anti-racist approach to teaching

This resource was developed by and for Scottish tertiary institutions as a sector-led and co-produced resource

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You just look like you've got a tan.  
Do you have hair under your hijab?  
Do people eat insects in your country?  
I just don't see colour.  
I don't think of you as black.

# Call it racism.

**#CallItRacism**



In this resource, we offer a model to help you explore how we can apply an “anti-racist” approach to how we teach (rather than focusing on what we teach), i.e., the pedagogical stance of the teaching specific disciplines.

Mike Watts (2020), while discussing strategies for teachers and mentors to cope with contingent questions, proclaims:

The ‘bottom line’ here is that complex learning is complex, not just because we derive learning from a multitude of sources, but because it is a-synchronous, serendipitous, and happens as small ‘nudges of knowledge’ (Salehjee & Watts, 2020, p.178) throughout life.’

Although this statement is directed to science teachers and mentors, we believe that it invites any teacher/tutor/mentor/practitioner teaching in any educational setting to self-reflect on their own pre-assumptions and recognise that students as learners bring and accumulate knowledge as small nudges over their lifetime. Therefore, their viewpoints of similar and/or different life experiences/events are unique and self-perceived.

### The Model

Inspired by Watts’ (2020) proclamation on ‘contingent questioning’, we offer four fictionalised case studies below, each of which we analyse through four main features:

1. Addressing unexpected questions from the students on gender, race, religion and social class or a combination of these socially-ascribed characteristics
2. Anticipating possibility in the differing perceptions of the students
3. Self-reflecting on your teaching practices based on the accumulative ‘nudges of knowledge’ that a student can bring in the classroom
4. Supporting/mentoring colleagues to deal with contingency questions

The four case studies we present here are hypothetical and fictional, though some recent events and our literature reading inspire them.



### CASE STUDY 1

A short film – ‘Mariam’ (2016) – is used by a Humanities department at a Scottish university to introduce students to general debates about Islam in French society and also to more specific issues surrounding the 2004 law banning conspicuous religious symbols in French schools. Lecturers begin our analysis of the film by exploring the understandings/perceptions students might have of the ‘veil’ and getting them to think about its complexity as a symbol. Other images of veils are also used to get the conversation going.

Drawing on the stimulus above, we have created a fictional scenario of how a seminar discussing the film could have played out. This is an entirely fictionalised account but it is based on tiny incidents that we have heard happening in other contexts and so is very much grounded in reality.

### Fictional Scenario

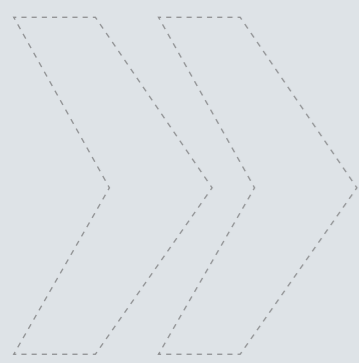
Dr Y is running a seminar after the group screening of Mariam. She begins with some general questions about the plot to gauge the levels of comprehension in the group, which is made up of mainly local commuting students, several Erasmus students and one student of colour. One of the local students, Lee, feels very passionately about the ‘veil’ and thinks it is wrong that women wear it – he talks loudly and vociferously about why it is oppressive for women and why it should be banned. His comments are broadly welcomed by others in the class, particularly the Erasmus students. He asks Dr Y why she is even showing this ‘anti-feminist’ film? The teacher is quite shocked as the purpose of showing this film has been so deeply misunderstood by these students. She responds by explaining that her purpose was not to be ‘anti-feminist’ at all, and moves the conversation on to a question about the use of language in the film. Dr Y tries to be inclusive and looks to students who have not spoken yet. She asks the student of colour, Yasmin,



**Students as learners bring and accumulate knowledge as small nudges over their lifetime.”**

her thoughts to try and bring her voice into the discussion. Yasmin just shakes her head and doesn’t say anything. The following week, Dr Y notices that Yasmin doesn’t come to class, nor the following week. They then move on to a different text and Dr Y forgets about the incident. In the essays the students submit at the end of the module, Dr Y notices that Lee includes a number of comments in his critical reflection on the film that make her uncomfortable because of the generalising way he talks about women and also about Islam in France. Yasmin’s critical reflection is a scathing critique on French colonialism and she argues for her right to wear the veil if she chooses. Dr Y will never see the students again as the module is finished and she is moving on to another university.





### From the teacher's perspective:

- She was trying to prompt a discussion on French colonialism but a large number of her students were not ready to engage with this. These views could potentially create conflict in the class and/or make some students uncomfortable. This level of discussion was not what Dr Y had expected at university honours-level. She had assumed her students would think critically and be willing to engage with different perspectives.
- Yasmin never came back to class to discuss the film but she did submit a powerful and personal piece of work that showed strong engagement with the thematic and cultural aspects of the film. However, all her opportunities to engage this student further and welcome her voice and experiences into the class were gone. Dr Y was saddened by the fact that this was a very strong student yet because she had never spoken in class, Dr Y had assumed she was not interested nor engaged with the discussions.
- Lee's assignment revealed some racist overtones that had been there (implicitly) in class and yet never overtly stated. Unfortunately, his voice had dominated much of the discussion. Was Dr Y complicit in these views by not coming down on them more strongly in discussion? She wanted to address his comments in the assignment but was worried that she might get into trouble from the university if she were to make a big deal of it now.
- Lee's challenge to Dr Y's choice of curriculum material in class had been left hanging partly because of her own discomfort with the confrontation and the nature of the question.
- Dr Y had wanted to be inclusive and invite in different voices to the discussion in the seminar and yet Yasmin had never come back to that class. Dr Y was frustrated that her focus on inclusion seemed to have made everything worse.

### From Yasmin's perspective:

- As the only student of colour in most of her classes, she was continually being asked her opinion as if she were a representative of all students of colour. This constant representation was weighing her down.
- She had heard opinions from people like Lee a lot and was tired of hearing the same loud argument with little understanding of context and little curiosity of her own perspective (as opposed to her representative one).

- There was no point in going back to the same class. It was clear that the teacher didn't understand why this way of teaching was futile and she didn't understand why she had to learn from the other students anyway. Surely the teacher was meant to be the expert? She didn't want to hear the same ugly, stupid voices all the time.
- Yasmin enjoyed writing her critical reflection. She was able to go back through all the resources Dr Yee had prepared and she did a lot of research too.

### From Lee's perspective:

- Lee was the first student in his family to ever go to university and his friends gave him a hard time for studying French, which was 'girly'.
- His teachers had really encouraged him at school to develop his voice and share his opinions and he was used to being the only boy in class.
- Lee's marks for his assessments had not been high and he was carrying several modules from the previous year. He struggled with written work.

### What 'nudges of knowledge' can we all take from this incident, regardless of discipline?

- What are our assumptions about our students?
- What do we know about our students?
- We need to address difficult questions directly
- We need to think about what 'inclusive practice' looks like in our own context
- We need to stop using specific students to do all the work for us

**Reflection point:**  
**What strategies can we all, as teachers, put in place to respond to the situation above?**



## CASE STUDY 2

A large departmental School at a Scottish university carried out an inclusive curriculum audit of its sub-honours teaching during the summer of 2020. Four undergraduate students were employed to collect data (via Moodle) on the module reading lists, case studies, images of people in slides and topics covered, and the data were used to prompt discussions at a whole-School staff meeting on inclusive curricula, where teaching staff also shared examples of current good practice.

Drawing on the stimulus above, we have created a fictional scenario from an imaginary university, in an anonymous discipline, of a meeting between Programme Leaders and the students carrying out this kind of sensitive and difficult work. This is an entirely fictionalised account, but it is based on tiny incidents that we have heard happening in other contexts and so is based on reality.

### Fictional Scenario

The Programme Leaders (PL) of the MMMM programme at the University of Z were meeting the four paid student interns who had been auditing their programme from a decolonising the curriculum perspective. This initiative was the first of its kind and the two PLs felt nervous and excited about the student findings. This was only their second year on the programme and nothing like this had ever been done before at the university. Tamara, Zhe and Arshana had spent two months working on this project on the programme on which

they had themselves been undergraduate students. They too were nervous and excited about this first meeting. The meeting did not go as any of them had planned. The students began by sharing some of the racist experiences they had encountered in their time as students on campus and also in the large urban city in which the university was found. For example, one teacher had told Tamara that her English was really good (it was her native language) and Zhe had been removed from a group presentation with his friends because the teacher had decided it was better to keep people from the 'same cultures' together because of how they did groupwork. The Programme Leaders were saddened by these stories and didn't quite know how to respond as it was hard to see how that related to the curriculum explicitly.

They expressed sympathy for those experiences and tried to move the conversation back to the course materials. The students had identified a range of issues, from the use of images of people of colour in PowerPoints to the western-centric resources. These kind of issues were exactly what the Programme Leaders had been hoping the students would identify, so they could fix them, but they were surprised by the other aspects of the curriculum they mentioned. Groupwork was a huge challenge because of the ways in which it was often structured (or not) and the tensions this led to for learning and also for assessments. The students offered multiple examples of microaggressions they, and others, had suffered from through the approach to Learning and Teaching which the PLs had hoped was inclusive and which offered students a choice.

Both staff and students left the meeting feeling exposed and at a loss as to where to go next.



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**“Racism exists on our campuses and in our society. Call it what it is and reject it in all its forms. We stand united against racism.”**

**Students’ perspectives:**

- They couldn’t understand why the PLs were so focused on the curriculum itself when many of the other barriers to learning were much broader than what happened in the physical (or online) learning space.
- The students had been pleased to get this paid opportunity to share their experiences and perspectives and to improve the curriculum for future students but they were tired of being asked for their opinion and then staff members not wanting to listen, which is what they felt had happened here. Zhe in particular felt his own experience had been denied in the meeting.
- The experience of undertaking the audit had been exhausting for the students because of their findings, which had been so negative. It had made explicit what they previously knew to be implicit and they weren’t sure what to do with all of this now.

**Programme Leaders’ perspectives:**

- This was an initiative these staff members were doing above and beyond the day job which would lead to potential significant redesign of their programme. They are deeply committed to this work and felt upset by the findings.
- They also felt powerless in the face of the shared experiences of the students and the racism they had experienced by fellow colleagues and students. The results were not the feel good findings that the Dean had been looking for and it was hard to see how they could effect positive change from all of this.
- The conversation had been more difficult than they had anticipated and they were worried that by trying to put across the institutional and programme perspective, they had denied the students’ voices.
- One of the PLs in particular, worried that she had seemed racist when she had felt her groupwork assessment was under attack.

**What ‘nudges of knowledge’ can we, as Programme Leaders, all take from this incident?**

- If we want to involve students in the design and creation of our programmes from an anti-racist perspective, we need to think very carefully about what we are looking for (from their perspectives) and what actions we can take forward.
- It is useful to establish expectations at the beginning of this programme for staff and students. Would it be helpful to have this conversation together where assumptions, hopes and fears could be shared?
- Programme Leaders’ influence is often difficult to tease out and articulate. There is learning to be had from exploring the meaning of ‘curriculum’ in each programme team and from talking to all students about how different perspectives are welcomed in.
- As a Programme Leader, what role do you see for students?
- As a Programme Leader, how can you shape anti-racist curricula by example?

**Reflection point:**  
**What strategies can we all, as teachers, put in place to respond to the situation above?**

**CASE STUDY 3**

A new university lecturer – Sam – is teaching an undergraduate petroleum engineering module. The lecturer and the majority of the students are White (with two Chinese, one Indian student and one Omani student), and all the students identify themselves as male. In one of his online lectures, Sam gave the students a pre-reading task to read the UK Parliament debate (2020) pack on ‘The UK oil and gas industry’.

Sam, being a devotee of Simon Reeve’s documentaries, brought in a Simon Reeve video where a young Burmese boy without any PPF is drilling and collecting the oil on illegal grounds. The video then showed two White men exhibiting health and safety measures. After showing the visuals, Sam asked the students to discuss the importance of health and safety measures in the petroleum industries.

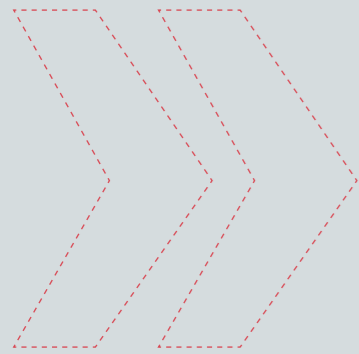
During the group discussions, one of the students – Ajay – was called out by his class fellows (‘Oh Ajay your family is on the screen’) as he resembles the Burmese [Rohingya Muslim] man shown in the picture. However, Ajay is Scottish and not Burmese. Sam could see that Ajay was feeling unsettled and looking at him to intervene in the discussion. Sam was not expecting such a discussion and felt unable to intervene and so abruptly asked the students to stop the debate, and he got on with the rest of the lecture.



1. The Guardian (2015) Revealed: BP’s close ties with the UK government. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/may/20/revealed-bps-close-ties-with-the-uk-government>
- 2: BBC 2 (May 2018) Burma with Simon Reeve (video time 13:26). <https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/b0b4dn84/burma-with-simon-reeve-series-1-episode-2>

Drawing from the scenario, we see two issues – one that there was a mis-representation of White British people as intellectually superior and well-equipped compared to Burmese people, and the other that the visible characteristics of Ajay were used to label the student as being of religion and nationality to which he doesn’t belong. So, overall, Sam unintentionally provoked the roots of inequity in the lecture.





### Sam's perspective

- Sam felt the tension but didn't know how to intervene in this discussion. He had considered saying that Ajay is not Muslim, but then he thought that this would undermine the religion of Amjad – the Omani student of the class. He decided just to stop the discussion and move on to the rest of the lecture.

### Ajay's perspective

- During this incident, Ajay – being a high-achiever and a quiet individual – kept on looking at Sam for support which he didn't get and even after the lecture there was no correspondence from Sam. This impacted on the teacher student bond between Sam and Ajay.
- Ajay couldn't see the sympathetic side of Sam; what he saw was White supremacy. So, should he talk to Sam about it? Or complain about this incident to the course leader?

### What 'nudges of knowledge' can we, teachers, all take from this incident?

- Teaching is not always the same as learning, because the learners bring a wealth of knowledge from varying sources.
- Planning for lectures, activities and resources needs to be culturally responsive, i.e., not everything that interests you could bring the learning you expect. Careful planning needs to be accommodated.
- Your gender, ethnicity, class and (non)religious visible characteristics can impact on the learning of the students.
- Ensure that you reflect on the situation and find ways to regain the trust bond with your students as soon as possible.
- Don't be afraid to ask for help from your Programme Leader or other Learning and Teaching colleagues and be vigilant in taking actions against anti-racist or anti-religious sentiments.

**Reflection point:**  
What strategies can we all, as teachers, put in place to respond to the situation above?



## CASE STUDY 4

Second year undergraduate students had their first lecture on Probability. The tutor explained what this course entails and, keeping the context-based learning approach, asked the students to research how probability is used in the recent news and give a 10 minute presentation on their findings in teams of four students. Unsurprisingly, a number of groups presented on Coronavirus. A group of students presented their work on the increased probability of Black, Asian and minority ethnic people contracting COVID-19, and associated deaths.

The group concluded their presentation by saying "The UK government now need to send Black, Asian and minority ethnic people to Mars? Or relocate them nearer to hospitals?" Chris – a White student – found this conclusion discriminatory and left the lecture. The teacher – James – noticed this tension and firmly said "...or the UK government could send the White people to Mars".

### The group's perspective

- The students recently attended a presentation skills workshop where the instructor advised them to bring humour into their presentations to stand out among other presentations.
- They understood from James' body language that what they said was inappropriate and clarified that this was not their intention.
- Their justification was that they didn't offend any Black, Asian or minority ethnic person as all the students in their class are White.
- Nonetheless, it was posted somewhere on Twitter as a joke, which they used to conclude their presentation.

### Chris's perspective

- Every summer, Chris supports a local primary school with their effort in the integration of refugee children. He has worked with the children and the families closely. One of the children he knew was physically and verbally abused by their neighbour. Chris and his team were protesting against this incident and supporting the child to overcome the crisis. He got very upset that his class fellows from families like his could "talk such nonsense", so he left the Zoom class and reported his thoughts to James.

### James's perspective

- James understood the situation well, and he believed that he had dismissed the conversation. But when the group apologised to him, and Chris reported his thoughts – he realised that he had actually supported the isolation of Black, Asian and minority ethnic people from White people by saying that White people should go to Mars.





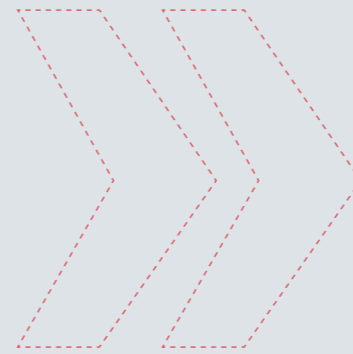
### What 'nudges of knowledge' can we, teachers, all take from this incident?

- Remind yourselves and students to self-check the use of language, ideology and media-mediated knowledge.
- Use humour that does not target any ethnicity, religion, gender or class.
- Having no Black, Asian and minority ethnic students in the lesson or even elsewhere doesn't mean that discriminatory talk is allowed morally and ethically.
- Not everything on Twitter is culturally responsive to be used in their presentations/assignments.
- Use an anti-discriminatory lens to critique the media-based resources including the scientific reports on societal challenges, such as Coronavirus and Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups.

**Reflection point:**  
**What strategies can we all, as teachers, put in place to respond to the situation above?**



**Having no Black, Asian and minority ethnic students in the lesson or even elsewhere doesn't mean that discriminatory talk is allowed morally and ethically."**



### References:

Salehjee, S. & Watts, D.M. (2020), *Becoming Scientific: Developing Science Across the Life-course*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Watts, M. (2020), 'Supporting beginning teachers to cope with contingencies'. In Salehjee, S. (2020), *Mentoring Science Teachers in the Secondary School: A Practical Guide*. London: Routledge.

### Further resources:

Govender, N (2019) *Can you see a social issue? (Re)Looking at everyday texts* (weblog) The Anti-Racist Educator, 21st October, Available from: <https://www.theantiracisteducator.com/post/can-you-see-a-social-issue-re-looking-at-everyday-texts> (last accessed 2nd September 2021)

Rowland, T., & Zazkis, R. (2013), 'Contingency in the mathematics classroom: Opportunities taken and opportunities missed'. In *Canadian Journal of Science, Mathematics and Technology Education*, 13(2), 137-153.

Salehjee, S. (commissioned for publication), 'Decolonising the science curriculum'. *London Review of Education*.

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QAA



**Offensive questions, stereotypes and 'jokes' have a lasting impact on individuals, affecting their mental health, career progression and overall welfare at college or university.**

It's time to stop sweeping these microaggressions under the rug.  
Call racism out for what it is and challenge unacceptable behaviour.

It's time to take a stand.

**#CallItRacism**

Call it racism | Challenge racist behaviour | Change racist structures