Staff Stories with anti-racist curriculum reflections

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

How to use this resource

The following resources are designed to prompt HE and FE staff to think about the importance and immediate necessity of developing an anti-racist curriculum. Presented are four creative non-fictions set out as short ‘scripts’. These are essentially stories based on real staff experiences of working in FE and HE, which might be read or acted out. The names, locations and settings of the stories have been changed to anonymise staff and students. Those reading, listening and/or watching these scripts are asked to put themselves in the role and position of key characters in each scenario in an attempt to understand their experience(s). To support this activity, some reflexive questions have been provided to help prompt thinking.

> **“By listening and engaging with others’ stories we can understand the socio-cultural fabric of life and the lives of those who experience inequality and discrimination.”**

Why use storytelling?

This storied approach to learning and understanding is rooted in a narrative philosophy. Narrative researchers argue we are storytelling beings and stories animate (our) human life. They work for and *on* people, affecting what people see as real, as possible, and as worth doing or best avoided. They prompt people to reflect and change their lives and for this reason taking a narrative or storied approach to ARC might be beneficial for those seeking to make changes to their pedagogical practices.

We understand and live our lives in and through stories. Our selves and identities, who we are and how other people see us, including our ethnic identities, are told via stories of our past, present and possible future(s) when we interact with other people. Coupled with this, our bodies, our physical, fleshy bodies, tell these stories both literally and figuratively. Not only do we use our voices to tell stories about our lives, but our bodies also perform them. People we meet make assumptions about our life stories, selves and identities based on how our body looks. The way we dress and decorate our body, for example, tells others a story about our lives, how we understand our life and who we are.

Importantly though, the stories we tell are not always free choices. They are shaped by socio-cultural processes and institutions where particular identities are often privileged and, because of this, others experience forms of inequality, inequity, and discrimination. Therefore, by listening and engaging with others’ stories we can understand the socio-cultural fabric of life and the lives of those who experience inequality and discrimination. Notably, although not necessarily taking a narrative approach per se, critical race scholars also recognise the value of individuals’ stories to understand widespread inequalities for similar reasons.

Further Reading

Clandinin, D.J. and Rosiek, J., 2019. ‘Mapping a landscape of narrative inquiry: Borderland spaces and tensions’. In D. J. Clandinin (Ed) *Journeys in Narrative Inquiry* (pp. 228-264). Routledge.

Milner, H.R., 2010. ‘Race, narrative inquiry, and self-study in curriculum and teacher education’. In Milner, H.R (Ed) *Culture, Curriculum, and Identity in Education* (pp. 181-206). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Rollock, N. and Gillborn, D., 2011. ‘Critical Race Theory (CRT)’, British Educational Research Association online resource. Available online at https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/critical-race-theory-crt Last accessed 7th July 2021.

Solórzano, D.G. and Yosso, T.J., 2002. ‘Critical race methodology: Counter-storytelling as an analytical framework for education research’. *Qualitative Inquiry, 8*(1), (pp. 23-44).

Story 1:
Islamophobia in the classroom

Context: Aleema (female, mid 30s, Muslim, wearing hijab) is a lecturer in the University's Geography department, but as a human geographer she works closely with colleagues on a degree programme on disaster management. She is conducting a tutorial linked to a recent lecture on political violence and the implications this has on humanitarian aid. A white male undergraduate student (James) in the class challenges Aleema on a series of issues, making points that are Islamophobic.

Aleema: *So, based on the examples everyone has looked at so far, it seems we can all see that it is problematic to offer humanitarian aid in the ways we'd like when there are these types of political unrest and violence. Does anyone have any questions before we move on?*

James: *Based on the examples we've looked at in our group it seems like most of these problems are in Muslim countries, so isn't this more about religion than political violence?*

[Visible discomfort from some surrounding students]

Aleema: *Well, there are high(er) populations of Muslim people in some of the countries you have looked at, but not all of them, and that doesn't mean that religion is the source of the problem, but more the political systems that are or are not in place…*

James [interrupting]: *…Oh come on, how can people that believe in genital mutilation as a legitimate practice be peaceful? The Prophet Muhammad molested children and he is still idealised by them. Let's face it, that religion is spread by the sword so it's no wonder there is chaos in these countries. I'm not even sure we should offer aid to them. Why would you if that's what you believe?*

[Surrounding students look shocked and uncomfortable, but no one speaks up]

Aleema [shocked/frustrated/uncomfortable by James' comments and claims]: *Well some of your assumptions about Islam and Muslim people are not quite accurate there, and I can certainly tell you that is not what I believe, but in any case, we're straying off topic. We're supposed to be looking at the political systems and infrastructures that affect aid. Islam is a religion that shapes the lives of billions of people. It doesn't explain political violence in a number of cases we've looked at…*

James [interrupting again]: *Well, you're Islamic. Aren't these types of things accepted, especially from where you're from? Even if it isn't what you personally believe, people from where you're from, that's what they believe isn't it?*

Aleema [frustrated]: *Well, this class isn't about me, my beliefs, or my religion and as I have said, I think you might need to go away and look at what Islam is and what it means to most Muslim people. Remember, if you're going to end up working with charities and organisations who deliver humanitarian aid, you really need to understand different religions and cultures. Like I said, for me and many other researchers in this area, this is not about religion it is about the political systems that are or are not in place. I think maybe we should pick this up separately, at another time so we can refocus on today's topic.*

[Fade to Aleema's reflections of this]

Aleema: *That was such an uncomfortable experience, especially as James was so persistent. I had to really try and hide my frustration from him and the rest of the class. It is beyond me that people cannot only think these things but say them out loud. It was clear though that a number of other students in the class felt uncomfortable, not least other Muslim students. But in that room, I am the authority and students expect me to respond to these types of comments. The truth is though, I felt so uncomfortable and angry. I was having to explain and defend the religion of billions of people, because somehow in the eyes of this student, I am Islam and Islam is inherently wrong. I know I said I'd have a separate discussion with him after the class, but in all honesty, I feel so uncomfortable being alone in a room with him, after the comments he had made which clearly defined his beliefs about Muslim people including me. I'm just glad he didn't stay after today's class. I don't even know where to turn with this. I'm not sure my white colleagues will even understand. When I have spoken to them about these sorts of things previously, they just brush it off as students being ill-informed. That felt more like a personal attack though.*

Reflective questions:

- Have you ever felt threatened or personally attacked by students or colleagues whilst at work? Do you know of colleagues who have?
- Do you know what support mechanisms are in place at your institution for staff in this position?
- Would you be able to effectively support a colleague who was experiencing these types of interactions in the classroom? What support would you offer?

> **People we meet make assumptions about our life stories, selves and identities based on how our body looks."**

Story 2:
Black athletes and genetic differences – Biological reductionism in the classroom

Context: A sport science lecture where the tutor (Alan, white male, early 50s) is discussing genetics, physiological differences and athletic talent or ability. Alan is a physiologist and therefore does not really engage in social analyses of race and ethnicity. Unbeknown to him, the previous week the same students have covered content in their social science class on ethnicity and sport. Sarah and Alex, two students in the class (Sarah, is a white woman and Alex, is a black man) challenge him on his biologically reductionist views. He later challenges his colleague on this after the class (Amanda, white woman, 30s).

[In the lecture]

Alan: *Ultimately then, if we look at Silva et al.'s 2010 paper we can see that African American subjects, particularly women, see the biggest decline in skeletal muscle after the age of 27, compared to white subjects, but we don't really know why. We need to investigate this further. This is something you need to consider when working with athletes though.*

[Alan notices a raised hand]

Alan: *Yes, Sarah you have a question?*

Sarah: *I'm not sure if this is relevant, but last week in our social issues class we looked at some of the Active Adults Survey data and materials on ethnicity and race, and we looked at some of the reasons for these types of patterns, like access to sport resources and facilities, lack of role models in sport and physical activities. So might this explain some of the reasons why skeletal muscle declines in some groups?*

Alan: *Well, this is a genetic thing really. It's the muscles we're looking at rather than external factors.*

[Sarah looks a little embarrassed and downtrodden, like she's got this wrong. This is noticed by another student, who gets her point.]

Alex: *I think what Sarah is saying is that if we know that African American adults in their 20s have fewer opportunities to take part in sport, exercise and physical activity, perhaps because they tend to have greater responsibilities for family care or less economic resource… [finding the words] …so umm… wider social problems, this might account for the biological differences we see in these groups, because perhaps white middle class women of the same age have different life experiences.*

Alan: [a bit flustered]: *Yes, I guess so but we're looking at genetics here. Biology. Scientific evidence from body scans…*

Alex [interrupts]: *…But aren't the two connected? Essentially, you're saying that because I am black, genetically I'm going to lose more skeletal muscle than someone who is white, because it's part of my genetics. I can get that, but don't you also get that because I have fewer opportunities to take part and stay in sport or even have a career in coaching football for example, because of racial inequality in workplaces and sport, that could explain these differences as well. What am I saying is that I don't disagree entirely, and obviously that is a pattern according to this research, but if you dismiss life experiences then aren't we just taking quite a biological reductionist approach from the 70s? You know the whole black men sink to the bottom of the pool because they have denser muscle tissue and white men can't jump and all of that?*

Alan [getting frustrated and feeling uncomfortable]: *I'm not sure what you mean by biological reductionism as such, we need to cover these core biological ideas and differences in the curriculum. Maybe you can revisit this social side of things in Amanda's social issues class next week.*

[Alex looks a little dejected and defeated]

[Fade to staff office: Amanda is sat at her desk when Alan returns from his class.]

Alan: *What have you been teaching the third years?*

Amanda: *We've been looking a racism in sport and exercise the past week or so, why?*

Alan: *They basically said I was not looking at social inequalities when looking at genetic data on muscle mass today. I didn't know what to say. It was a bit embarrassing. They were quite adamant. Well Sarah and Alex in particular. And because Alex seemed to hold quite a strong opinion on it all, I just couldn't really say anything back. I mean, you have to be so careful what you say now, especially because...* [pause/uncomfortable shuffling] *… well, you know…*

Amanda: *What, because Alex is black?*

Alan: *Well, yes. I don't want to say the wrong thing… You know what it's like, you say the wrong thing and all of a sudden, you're racist. You can't say anything these days. You've got to be so careful. It's not that I didn't agree with what they were saying, but it's just not what we were looking at. And who am I to comment on the life experiences of black women? What do I know? I can't comment on that.*

Amanda: *Do you think they might have had a point though?*

Alan: *Look, I went to the "decolonising the curriculum seminar"* [air quotes and eye roll]. *I "decolonised"* [air quotes] *my reading list. I deal with hard facts. Proper science. Not surveys and people's feelings* [sarcasm on the latter]. *That's what you do! It's all about feeelings!*

[Amanda rolls eyes]

Alan: *And what is all this nonsense on biological reductionism?*

Amanda: *What, you mean people reducing analyses down to biological differences without looking at the bigger picture?*

[Alan tuts and rolls eyes]

Amanda:*Sounds like they had a point! Perhaps denying those connections between biology and society wasn't great* [slight smugness as a social scientist and part of their internal joke]. *It might have been better to just accept your own privileges as a white middle class man in front of them and say that because of those privileges it's perhaps something you have considered less in your own research and indeed in your field. And maybe you could think about it a bit more* [smiles].

Alan: [scoffs] *You're off on your political correctness again.* [Mutters under breath] *Privileges… Cup of tea in half an hour?*

Reflective questions:

- Do you ever worry about saying the 'wrong' thing when students or colleagues raise debates and discussions around race and ethnicity?
- Are you worried you might be accused of saying something that might be perceived as racist?
- Do you expect that colleagues in other areas of the curriculum or other subject areas should be solely responsible for teaching topics associated with race and ethnicity?

> **“Ensuring our Black, Asian and minority ethnic students and staff see themselves reflected in the curriculum, not as an exception but a central and valued part of it.”**

Story 3:
The reluctant white ally

Context: Michelle (white female, early 40s) is a lecturer in the School of Architecture and Design. She is leading a class looking at the use of art, in particular sculpture, in building projects. The class is taking place at a time when there is mass global unrest in response to police brutality against black communities. As part of these protests the discussion descends into debate around the removal of statues of prominent figures associated with colonialism and the slave trade. Whilst Michelle is sympathetic to these ideas, she is concerned about how she is perceived by her students, particularly those who identify as Black, Asian and minorty ethnic. She wants to be an ally but doesn’t really know how to be the best ally she can be.

Michelle: *So far we’ve looked at art installations and embedding of sculptures in new building projects, but we also need to think about how we do this in existing, older buildings too, especially if we’re involved in renovation projects. Have you guys got any ideas on this?*

Sam: *Well, we might not have any statues left if the* [BLM] *protesters keep tearing them down!*

Amy: *Might not be a bad thing. Why do we want slave traders being on our museums and university buildings? I mean, the buildings are beautiful and then you have these statues that are just so wrong. Why should we celebrate and literally put some of these people on pedestals? It’s not right if you ask me.*

Morgan: *Yeah, but you can’t just erase history. That’s what ‘they’ say isn’t it? They’re talking about putting up plaques to make it clear what they did so people can learn from them.*

Amy: *Hardly much better is it though? It doesn’t erase what they did and what they stood for.*

Sam: *Yeah, putting a plaque up is a bit of a cop out isn’t it. Like sticking a plaster on a gaping wound.*

Morgan: *Yes, but it was just a different time. It was accepted at that time. You can’t change that and if we go back to Michelle’s question, that artwork, those statues are historic, and they’re literally embedded in our architecture all over the country. I’m not sure they should be torn down and destroyed. That’s just me anyway, but I can see why people think they should come down. I get it. You know, I can’t really relate to how they* [protestors] *feel as such, but I get it. I support them of course, but from a design point of view it’s tricky.*

Michelle: *I think that’s the point isn’t it; do you preserve them at all? Do you add to them? Move them? There are no right answers as such. Any other thoughts? I mean, I feel like I perhaps can’t comment as much as some of you on this, I don’t have the same lived experiences…*

Sam: *…Well, I don’t want to embarrass anyone, but what have you got to say on this Lisa? You’re normally quite vocal about these sorts of things?*

Lisa (Black student in late teens): [Looks a little bit thrown/ embarrassed] *Well… ummm… I’m not…*

Michelle [feeling like she must step in to save Lisa): *Look, it’s difficult to fully understand some of the complexities of these particular cases that are going on in the media at the moment. I’m sure for some of you this is quite a contentious issue and one that is probably quite upsetting. Perhaps we can look at other examples, perhaps of religious buildings and their statues and sculptures?*

[Fade to Michelle’s reflections of this]

Michelle: *Phew… That was a bit of a tough class at points. I knew there was a danger of us creeping into discussion of the Black Lives Matter protests just because of the media reporting on it so prominently at the moment, and it’s a really good example. I was just cringing a little bit at some aspects of the debate, but I didn’t want to stifle it. It’s a tough one, do you let it play out or do you stop it? And you need to make sure you jump in before it gets too far. I don’t know, it’s important students have the space to have these discussions, even if it is a little bit out of our remit. It’s more difficult sometimes when there are students of colour in the room. They have such valuable lived experiences that could really contribute to everyone’s learning, but I don’t want to embarrass them or put them under pressure to speak about these things. They shouldn’t have that put on them, of course not. I didn’t expect Lisa’s friends to push her into speak though and she did look a bit awkward and put on the spot. I’d better email her because I did sort of cut her off. I was just worried that she had been put on the spot.*

Reflective questions:

- Do you ever feel uncomfortable during or after when discussions around race emerge in your classes?
- Do you feel you have the right tools to effectively manage these discussions?

Story 4:
Behind the scenes of the curriculum – The staff break room

Context: It's that time of year when all of the students' final assessments are in and lecturers in various departments are drowning in a sea of marking. It's lunchtime and a relatively small group of staff have congregated in the staff break room to have a well-earned coffee and bite to eat. Naturally they get to discussing the students' work they are reading. It very quickly becomes apparent that Jamie (white male in his mid-20s) has made a poor assumption about one of his students.

Jamie: *Urgh I've just finished reading the most disappointing dissertation proposal I've come across so far. Well, it's not bad, it's just his writing.*

Sean: *I bet I could have a guess as to whose it is.*

Jamie: *I bet you could.*

Sean: *Lewis Carmichael, Dominic Michaels or Bradley Ababio.*

Jamie: *Well done. It's Bradley's. It's a shame. It's a good piece and he's got a great idea for his dissertation, but it's just the way he's written it. It's not the best. I've just said in the feedback that it would have benefitted from a proofread, preferably by a native English speaker, and maybe he could team up with a classmate to do a peer-review for future pieces.*

Olivia: *Well, that's a bit awkward seeing as he is from Nottingham.*

Jamie: *What do you mean?*

Olivia: *I mean he is from Nottingham. He's English. His family are from Ghana, but he's born and raised in Nottingham.*

Jamie: *No way?*

Olivia: *Yes. And when I was speaking to him about a job application the other day, he was saying he really wished he'd gone to Student Services at the start of this year because it's only now he's started getting some help with his writing style.*

Jamie: *I didn't realise. I just assumed from the name and I've seen him briefly in classes. But I've never really spoken to him.*

Sean: *Awkward. Have you sent it back to him yet?*

Jamie: *I feel really bad.*

[Fade to Bradley receiving his work]

Bradley [reading aloud to his flatmate Megan]: *He said "This would have benefitted from a proofread, preferably by a native English speaker".*

Megan: *What?*

Bradley: *I'm British. How much more native can I get!?*

Megan: *That's just so wrong.*

Bradley: *I don't know why I bother. That took me ages to check it all and everything. I really did try. I'm not sure how much longer I can do this. Every bit of work says about my writing, but this is just… well… They think I'm not even English. What's the point?*

Reflective questions:

- Have you ever made assumptions about a student or colleague based on their name or appearance?
- How can you move beyond these?

"Have you ever made assumptions about a student or colleague based on their name or appearance?"

AdvanceHE QAA

Enhancement Themes

Scottish Funding Council
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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