

Addressing Racism Through Advocacy in Action

Georgina Lawlor

Technological University Dublin

In this case study, students in an Advocacy and Community Organisation module co-created continuous assessment that supported them to deepen their understanding of racism and discrimination. From this work, students were able to directly feed in to the development of an institution-wide Action Plan on Race Equity, demonstrating how partnership in the classroom can lead to wider institutional change.

Introduction and Context

The Community Development and Youth Work (CDYW) programme is a full-time degree programme delivered in the School of Social Sciences, Law and Education on the Blanchardstown Campus of TU Dublin. We aim to deliver a rich and dynamic learning environment that is underpinned by the values of community development and youth work. These core values include participation and active involvement; equality, diversity and inclusion; partnership with young people and others; personal, social and political development; collective process; community empowerment; social justice and sustainable development and human rights.

In keeping with the values outlined above, during the 2020/2021 academic year we undertook an IMPACT funded project at programme level whose aim was to embed anti-racism in the CDYW programme. As part of this wider project the students under-taking the Year 4 module Advocacy and Community Organisation co-created the continuous assessment for the module with the guidance of the lecturer. Following several discussions, it was decided by the students and the lecturer that they would design and implement an advocacy strategy which focused on the elimination of racial inequality and this would be linked to the CDYW Programme seminar to celebrate the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Inequality.



Image 1: Promotional Poster for Le Chéile Anti-Racism Project Seminar co-created by students in the CDYW programme

Project Outline

The topic of racism is one of local, national and international significance. The students have engaged with this topic throughout their programme of study and wanted to share the knowledge and skills they have learned in relation to racism and racial inequalities.

“As a class, we had built up so much knowledge on this topic and we felt it was a great subject to focus on since it has been part of the media the last couple of months with Black Lives Matter and the loss of George Nkencho, a young black man from Blanchardstown who was shot by Gardaí.”

Students then identified the overarching vision and mission for their advocacy project.

“Our mission is to raise awareness about racism throughout Technological University Dublin, Blanchardstown campus, community and identify a collective response to racism.”

Multiple discussions took place as to how the group were going to raise awareness of this issue, these conversations were student led but required facilitation and guidance from me as the lecturer. They decided to focus on their own learning journey over the course of their studies about race, racism and addressing racism. The decision was made to chart this chronologically in a pre-recorded video.

“All 9 of us started from different places, personally and professionally, and have supported each other on this learning journey. As this is our final year, this will be our way of capturing the knowledge, skills and values we have learned over the last 4 years in relation to racism and racial inequalities.”

The purpose of the guided learning journey was to act as a medium to support and encourage dialogue in the breakout rooms on how, as a University community, we can address racism and promote racial equality on our campus and in wider society. In preparation for facilitating discussions in the breakout rooms students reviewed the content from their module Combatting Racism and also reviewed current TU Dublin policies.

Action	Brief Description
Action A	<p>The students screened the pre-recorded video during the CDYW seminar to mark the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Inequality. The video opened with students reflecting on the beginning of their learning journey, highlighting what they did not know in first year: ‘I never knew how broad it [racism] was’, ‘I didn’t realise how complex it is, I didn’t understand the extent in Ireland’, ‘it wasn’t something I thought a lot about as it didn’t impact on my life’, ‘I didn’t know how to call it out. I knew what I meant but I didn’t have the words to say and I didn’t have the theory behind it’, two of students saying ‘I knew a little bit from my own personal experience and education’.</p> <p>The students went on to outline what they learned over the course of their studies: ‘I’ve learned that racism is more than words, beliefs and actions, it can also include barriers that prevent people from enjoying their dignity and equality’; ‘I’ve learned it’s more complex and different types of racism – institutional, individual, historical’, ‘I’ve learned about the history of racism, about white privilege, racism in an Irish context and some of the different dimensions to racism’; ‘I’ve also learned that I’m privileged not to have experienced this’; ‘Racism is a lot more widespread, it’s happening to men and women, boys and girls on a daily basis at home, in school, work and college’; ‘I understand that not all forms of racism are obvious – it’s about more than bad people, it’s about a bad system, a system that preserves racist ideas and practices. Society is structured in such a way that excludes particular groups of people from taking</p>

<p>Action A (continued)</p>	<p><i>part in society equally and form equal life outcomes’ and ‘I learned new terminology and also able to understand new terms linked with racism. This has been helpful in my experience, in my job and also in my surroundings changing how I see things’.</i></p> <p>The fourth year students concluded with their advice to other students – ‘Act, respond and be an ally’; ‘It’s not enough to say that you’re not racist you need to call people out when they are – you need to educate yourself about racism and your white privilege. You need to listen to those who are coming to you for support’; ‘We all have a voice, use yours. It’s important to research, to read, to watch, to learn and most importantly listen, listen to what’s being said out there’; ‘It’s not enough to not be racist you must actively work to be anti-racist. To be anti-racist we must have those difficult conversations about racism. Listen to and understand the experience of others, recognise and challenge our own prejudice. We must use our voice to challenge racism wherever and whenever we see it’.; ‘Inform yourself of the policies and procedures at TU Dublin, compare policies from different colleges’; ‘challenge it if you see racism happening’, ‘last one change, always be willing to make change’ and finally ‘don’t give up’.</p>
<p>Action B</p>	<p>Following the screening of the guided learning journey the students then facilitated small group discussions in breakout rooms on issues of racial inequality and what it might look like in TU Dublin. Among the issues raised was the need for more diverse staff on campus, the need to talk more about the issue, that it should be dual learning – students should have the space to teach lecturers, implement more in the programme from first year, more training, support and events around racism, that it is not just an issue for Humanities, celebrate and value diversity and show more inclusiveness on campus, for example in the canteen, signage. Action was required: silence can hurt – stand up for people and speak out, learn how to speak out to help someone, challenge without arguing and finally to carry an anti-racist approach out into society, not just in college.</p> <p>A summary of the main points from the discussion can be found using the link below: https://padlet.com/b00103573/w36lzbwt8f21bcn8</p>
<p>Action C</p>	<p>The content of the breakout room discussion was circulated to the TU Dublin Race Equity Working Group to feed into the development of the Action Plan on Race Equity. Thus, allowing students to achieve their goal of influencing policy development on addressing racism and promoting racial equality within TU Dublin.</p>

Reflections

Undertaking this assessment provided students with the opportunity to apply their advocacy skills and theoretical knowledge of social justice advocacy to challenge racial inequality and racism and to promote equality and diversity. Students created a platform to voice their lived experiences (both personal and professional) to not only create awareness of the issues but to influence policy development within TU Dublin. By honestly and openly reflecting on and sharing their learning journey students created a ‘brave space’ (Arao and Clemens 2013, p.142) where issues around racism and racial inequalities could be discussed and acted upon.

Reflecting upon both the process and the outcome of this assessment, a key learning point for me as an educator is the importance of creating the space for student-led activity within the teaching and learning and assessment spaces. Within this module I decided to prescribe that students were required to design and implement an advocacy strategy as part of the assessment for their module, however, the topic and the process would be student-led.

The approach taken supported on-going dialogue and conversation, with students bringing issues from their personal and professional lives into the classroom as they actively engaged with module content and theory in the development of their advocacy strategy. The impact of this on my professional practice is to recognise that through a more collaborative approach to assessment, interaction with content can be enhanced, assessment can become more authentic and that students should be given the opportunity to become active partners in shaping their learning and curriculum. Through my participation in the development and design of the advocacy initiative, as well as attending the event, there was tremendous learning for me around the students experience of racism(s) and how as educators we can listen and learn from this experience and embed anti-racist into practice based education.

Students completed a written reflection after the event. The consensus within the feedback was that it was an empowering and positive experience overall.

“The event was extremely successful and was filled with engagement, knowledge and information, both new and old. It was a great opportunity to unite and discuss a very relevant issue. I left the event feeling very uplifted and hopeful for the future on eliminating racism and racial inequality in not only TU Dublin but also in my own personal life by challenging and reporting racism.”

It is worth noting that this module and event took place during COVID restrictions were in place and all teaching and learning was online. This did present challenges and having the opportunity for in-person planning and discussion would have been preferable.

The content of the guided learning journey and the feedback from the breakout rooms informed the on-going work to embed anti-racism in CDYW programme and the Race Equity Working Group, giving students a voice in programme and policy development.

Reference List

Arao, B., and Clemens, K. (2013) ‘From safe spaces to brave spaces: A new way to frame dialogue around diversity and social justice’ in L. Landreman (ed.) *The art of effective facilitation: Reflections from social justice educators*, Sterling, VA: Stylus. Available at: <https://tlss.uottawa.ca/site/perspective-autochtone/1d-From-Safe-Spaces-to-Brave-Spaces.pdf>

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