



ASSEMBLY DAY 2025

Racial Slurs and tensions around race representation in class

Session 2 Parallel Dialogic Inquiry

**Facilitator: Jessica Quinn Harrison and Prof Aislinn O'Donnell
Maynooth University**



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SESSION 2 PARALLEL DIALOGIC INQUIRY

Meet the facilitators:



Prof Aislinn O'Donnell is Professor of Education in the Department of Education and is also a member of the Centre for Public Education and Pedagogy. Through a series of educational and pedagogical projects, both funded and unfunded, and in her teaching of philosophy of education, Aislinn came to situate her work and research in the field and tradition of education. She has worked with different students from primary education to adult

education, and has also worked closely with teachers and other educational practitioners on a number of art and philosophy projects. She is particularly interested in building connections and co-creating research between educational practitioners across the continuum of education, including youth work, and in developing collaborative research in teacher education.

Jessica Quinn Harrison is currently pursuing a PhD in Education at Maynooth University. Her research interests include sustainability education, teacher education and pedagogy.



Overview:



This pedagogical approach is motivated by those situations that arise in class/outside of it, where comments or conversations around controversial issues arise, and as educators we are left wondering if we could have done better!

This parallel dialogic inquiry session invited participants to consider and discuss real-world documented scenarios/stories provided by participants or colleagues (and their student teachers) on instances where controversial issues arose in an educational setting (either incidentally/ unexpectedly or through a planned lesson activity). Scenarios/stories were located within a post primary classroom setting, a staffroom, or in a teaching space in higher/further education. Any scenario/story might relate to topics such as inequality, bias or stereotyping, discrimination, elements of sustainable development, consumption and waste, climate action, migration, or power relations to name but a few. Participants were encouraged to consider theoretical/conceptual lenses (e.g. white privilege; power structures; cultural perspectives) that support interrogation of the issues, and practical pedagogical responses that support constructive learning. There was a strong focus on dialogue and participation in this session!

We adopted a shared approach to facilitating discussion across the session.

The session was not just for sharing; we hoped that ideas will be developed through dialogue. The following approach was taken:

- Participants are invited to sit in a circle
- Session starts with a Standing Circle where each participant offers one sentence in response to a question e.g. how you have encountered controversial issues in education?
- Facilitator points to the scenario (in the handbook and on printed sheets) and to the structured questions beneath. There will also be a sample set of 'rules of participation' that promote democratic participation and creation of a safe space for dialogue.
- A participant volunteers a response.
- Other participants indicate if they wish to speak. This is done in a subtle, non-intrusive way e.g. hand gesture, but not a raising of hands as this can put the speaker under pressure to finish. An object (e.g. ball) is passed to the next speaker to indicate that they have the floor.
- The facilitator intervenes - to keep participants on task; redirect conversations that are going off point; ask questions that support ideas to be developed;

prompt the speaker to invite another participant to speak; ensure all who wish to speak have an opportunity to do so.

- A note taker will consolidate key points for the final feedback session.

Scenario provided at the workshop:

Title:	Racial Slurs and tensions around race representation in class
Educator	Scenario generated by Aislinn O'Donnell
Educational Setting:	Junior Cycle - Post primary school classroom (English)
Details & considerations:	<p>The following scenario is a composite of number of scenarios that took place in classrooms in early 2024. It was a time of much social debate around migration and asylum, particularly in relation to the State's provision of accommodation and services for those in need. A number of arson attacks had taken place targeting properties associated with asylum seekers. Conversations in the staffroom reflect strongly held views with some significant divisions of staff evident. Some teachers were asking other teachers directly to take their side.</p> <p>This incident below happened the day after violent protests against direct provision centres in the area took place.</p> <p>Teacher Annie enters the classroom and begins to teach <i>To Kill a Mocking Bird</i>. She asks one of the students to read a section from the novel aloud. They get to the point of the text where the N word is used.</p> <p>Student, Ben whose family have come through war and direct provision says, "I'm not reading this word aloud. This is another example of racism and white supremacy in action. Why are we even reading this book? Every year someone tells the school that we should not be forced to speak that language aloud."</p> <p>Student, Sarah responds: "This is ridiculous. This is just another case of woke culture gone crazy. We are not allowed to say anything anymore in case it "triggers" something. It's just a word and it's pretty obvious that it is of its time in history so what is the problem?"</p> <p>Most of the rest of the class look uncomfortable and put their heads down, but some nod in agreement.</p> <p>Student, Angie shouts: "We are so tired of white people pretending not to see colour and making racism into just a bullying issue. Why do you want to</p>

	<p>force people to say aloud a word that's on the page? It makes it more likely that people will feel comfortable using it outside the classroom?"</p> <p>Student, Tom intervenes and says the N word aloud: "It's not a big deal. Get over it. It's just a word and it's pretty obvious from the book that they aren't condoning slavery or racism. I can't see the problem."</p> <p>Student, Sarah adds: "Yeah, fine. But I am tired of all the Black Lives Matter stuff. All lives matter. I don't want to live in a censored state."</p> <p>Student, Emma slips out of the classroom quietly.</p> <p>The class falls silent. The teacher slowly stands up and takes a deep breath.</p>
<p>A question(s) you would pose to participants about this scenario:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Who is dominating/opposing/silent?• Who is offering other positions?• What kind of response can the teacher in the example offer?



Key points discussed:

- Students regurgitate statements they have heard at home.
- Children don't actually understand what they are saying. Challenging that can be difficult as you sometimes hit a brick wall with parents.
- Educators face apathy in relation to sensitive topics which can be very discouraging and crushing when one has fully invested time and effort.
- Preparation of content and students beforehand is key
- Acknowledge hurt and not make assumptions
- Relationship with students is key
- Everyone in the room has a voice
- How do we challenge children to create their own views?
- We don't all have to agree with each other
- Create classroom rules to create a safe space
- In relation to the N word, censorship appropriate due to the derogatory nature and the harm it causes.
- Discrimination against travellers is normalised, celebrated and appreciated
- Accept other people's truths
- Be cognisant of what culture we want to promote
- Mismatch between what the educator and students deem to be controversial
- Lack of empathy, lack of understanding
- Weaponisation of racism and weaponisation of issues to stir the pot
- Classroom is a very political space

Testimonial



The racism workshop was excellent. I learned a lot that I can bring back to my work in teacher education. I also learned a lot about exploring stereotypes on that session.



Workshop Snippets

