

'Conscious' learning development: towards a pedagogy of race-consciousness

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Abstract

This article advocates a pedagogy of race-consciousnesses (PRC) to enhance the critical thinking abilities of all undergraduate students in higher education institutes (HEIs). It is envisioned that the cultivation of race-consciousness will be a means to not only value students' home culture but also to draw from this culture to develop their innate critical thinking abilities. Such an approach encourages students to critically engage with 'perspectives that are different from their own, whether those perspectives are expressed by a teacher or by a peer' (Arday and Mirza, 2018; Wallace and Rothschild-Ewald, 2000, p.19). PRC is situated in the 'middle space between students' own experiences and the expectations of the discourse communities in which they will have to achieve voice' (Wallace and Rothschild-Ewald, 2000, p.3). It is proposed that PRC will be first developed in the field of learning development (LD) because of the unique position and mandate of learning developers (Hartley, Hisdon and Keenan, 2010). This article hopes to spark conversations about race that have been largely absent from LD theory and practice.

Keywords: race; BME; BAME; award gap; pedagogy; learning development.

Introduction

The attention given to the BAME award gap and the impact of Covid-19 on the delivery of university courses has afforded learning development (LD) a unique opportunity to improve the learning experiences of students of colour. LD, in theory and practice, has largely remained unconscious about race and its impact on learning. Our unconsciousness or colour-blindness is not our default position. It is a state of being that we have actively sought to maintain:

Our research helps demonstrate that not seeing race, in a heavily racialised society, is a skill that has to be carefully taught and cultivated in order to be developed. It's not natural to just 'not see race'. Our eyes detect pigment, and our society gives value and meaning to such pigment. When we don't see it, we are engaging in a strategic denial of something apparent . . . this strategy, ostensibly contrived to contribute to a world where race matters less, ends up making race matter more. (Bartoli et al., 2016, pp.133-134).

To stir us to action from our unconsciousness, this article advocates a pedagogy of race-consciousnesses (PRC) to enhance the critical thinking abilities of all undergraduate students in higher education institutes (HEIs). It is envisioned that the cultivation of race consciousness will be a means to not only value students' home culture, but also draw from this culture to develop their innate critical thinking abilities. Such an approach encourages students to critically engage with 'perspectives that are different from their own, whether those perspectives are expressed by a teacher or by a peer' (Arday and Mirza, 2018; Wallace and Rothschild-Ewald, 2000, p.19).

Race-consciousness as superpower

My understanding of race-consciousness is derived from Tatum's (2001) notion of a 'race-conscious society', which came out of her development of teacher education programmes to prepare white English-speaking teachers to respond to the educational needs of a multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multilingual student population; a race-conscious society is 'a positive sense of racial/ethnic identity not based on assumed superiority or inferiority . . . for both White people and people of color' (p.53). Seeing race is not the problem; it becomes problematic when we uncritically or unconsciously assign hierarchies to the differences (Arday and Mirza, 2018, p.273).

Race-consciousness is not something that can be achieved with a single workshop or completing unconscious bias training; the development of race consciousness is a 'lifelong process that often requires unlearning the misinformation and stereotypes we have internalized not only about others, but also about ourselves' (Tatum, 2001, p.53). The concept of race-consciousness has a long history in African-American literature; just a few decades removed from the 13th Amendment's abolishment of slavery, Du Bois sought to

answer a profound question, 'How does it feel to be a problem?' (Du Bois, 2007, p7). He laid bare the 'souls of black folk' by articulating their awareness of being perceived as a problem and their dichotomic experiences with their white counterparts (Du Bois, 2007). Their othering by American society afforded African-Americans an almost out of body experience in which they were conscious of themselves and how they were perceived by others (Du Bois, 2007; Lemert, 2007). Du Bois (2007) saw this as a gift, though it was unfortunately given through being cursed, it was a gift that could be harnessed;

The negro is sort of a seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of looking at one's self through the eyes of others One ever feels his - twoness, – an American, a negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (p.8).

Building on this, Baldwin cultivated the idea of a superpower of race-consciousness:

If we – and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others – do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world. (1964, p.141).

The pedagogisation of race-consciousness

There have also been some attempts to pedagogise this superpower. Markowitz developed a pedagogical model to promote the development of race-consciousness in university students studying criminal justice:

By creating race-consciousness through classroom experience, one could introduce an innovative perspective on the nature of crime and justice; such a perspective would increase students' awareness of the relevance of this social phenomenon while creating discourse on meaningful solutions to the problems it creates. (1997, p.218).

More broadly, to combat the discontinuity between the ideas and action of university educational leaders, Agosto, Karanxha and Bellara (2015) sought to model a critical race theory-inspired 'race-conscious dialogue' for university educators to increase consciousness of how they may be implicated in institutional racism. In teacher education, Ullucci (2010) explored how teacher education programmes shape the development of race-consciousness amongst white teachers. Berchini (2016) looked at strategies to unobstructing pathways toward race-consciousness in English classrooms.

Though such studies show significant variation in the definition and application of race-consciousness, they are united in the importance that they give to developing a race-conscious environment. Emulating their example, it is important to identify why pedagogising race-consciousness is a worthy project. First, if we choose not to develop a race-consciousness classroom, we will implicitly embrace some degree of colour-blindness (Ullucci, 2010; Flores and Gunzenhauser, 2019). Viewing these concepts on a spectrum, race-consciousness at one end and colour-blindness at the opposite end, the less race-conscious one's practice is, the more likely you are to fall victim to the many pitfalls of colour-blindness. Colour-blindness is a figurative way of claiming an inability or refusal to be conscious of race or its implications (Agosto, Karanxha and Bellara, 2015). Every step away from race-consciousness leads us to the belief that 'discrimination is no longer a central factor affecting minorities' life chances' (Bonilla-Silva, 2014, p.77). Thus, embracing colour-blind practice may dull our awareness to the hurdles faced by our students (see Figure 1). We may leave 'racial microaggressions' unchecked, and we are less likely to take action against systemic oppression 'thereby supporting pro-racist ideologies by tolerating the status quo' (Diggles, 2014, p.3).

Second, developing a race-conscious pedagogy is crucial to move our practice from Cottrell's abstract, generic, and heavily cognitive how to approach towards regarding 'critical thinking as an affective and bodily process (rather than simply a cognitive one)' (Danvers, 2016, p.14). Similarly, Crossouard states that learning is always 'embodied, relational and affectively charged', rather than restricting it to a purely cognitive process (2012, p.745). Bailin and Siegel stress the importance of emotion in critical thinking; they argue that critical thinking should not be seen in conflict with feeling but can include it. Few topics outside of race are 'embodied, relational and affectively charged' (Bailin and Siegel, 2003, p.745). Thus, a pedagogy of race consciousness is fertile ground to facilitate critical thinking amongst our students.

Third, a pedagogy of race-consciousness is a means to capitalise on the double-consciousness that students of colour develop in societies that fail to appreciate their 'home cultures'. Their superpower has remained untapped – their hyper ability to see how they are perceived through the eyes of others, and then process this information to inform the most 'acceptable' response (Du Bois, 2007; Lemert, 2007). This is a calculation that is developed from the day the young child understands that their skin colour is more visible to others than themselves. Arguably, this can be pedagogised, or at the very least unpacked, for the benefit of students of colour who may feel that they have to constantly choose between their home cultures and 'privileged academic spaces' (Danvers, 2016, p.45). At least for a moment, they can feel some type of release by channelling their home cultures into these 'privileged academic spaces'. Moreover, white students will gain a greater understanding of the experiences of their black and brown counterparts.

Figure 1. A counter-storytelling of colour-blindness.

I was asked to deliver a session on academic writing. I was surprised to find that the class, which consisted of a solitary white lecturer and only black and brown students, had name cards on their desks. I understand that this is a valid method for remembering student names at the beginning of the term but using these name cards near the end was a curious practice. After the session, I enquired about the use of the name cards. The lecturer noted that it was to help him remember students' names. I then mentioned that many black and brown people believe that some white people think they look similar. So, his prolonged use of the name cards may reinforce this conception, which will cause underlying tension. When you address them, you may look at their name cards rather than their human faces, objectification of the worst kind. As with everyone, your students want to be seen and treated as individuals, not just one mass. Expecting the educator to embrace this revelation, I was shocked to hear, 'rubbish!'. Such dismissal coming from a self-professed critical pedagogue, who had written and researched critical pedagogy for many years, was utterly surprising. He did not want to acknowledge his positionality; he did not want to recognise his whiteness; he was simply a teacher who used a simple method to remember his students' names. Reddy (1998) explains that whiteness seems invisible, transparent, to those who are white: they are simply norms. However, the critical pedagogue failed to appreciate that whiteness makes itself 'hypervisible' to those who are not white. Reddy refers to her experience:

like most white people, I never really thought about whiteness itself or its implications for my life until I married a Black man and – far more consciousness-changing – had a Black child . . . I was performing white heterosexuality – quite unconsciously, in many areas of my life. (1998, p.57).

Of course, my assertion regarding the name cards may have been wrong, but this should not have stopped the pedagogue from reflecting on his race-neutral stance. The words of Friere came to me at that point: 'those who authentically commit themselves to the people must re-examine themselves constantly' (2014, p.60). We must all reflect on these matters because as Dyer notes, the sense of whiteness as a natural norm is an important component of hegemony, which 'secures its dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular' (1988, p.44).

Race and learning development

Learning development (LD), in practice and print, has not explicitly and meaningfully engaged with issues of race in the academy; race-consciousness is rarely invoked in relation to how it impacts one's pedagogy or positionality or as forming the content of a session. Though there is significant literature on race and learning in higher education, this has not been reflected in the very specific field of working 'with students to help them make sense of the seemingly mysterious and alienating practices of academia; and to work with academics to rationalise and clarify such practices' (Hartley, Hisldon and Keenan, 2010, p.16). This is a curious admission, considering race has always shaped a student's educational experience. Historically, it determined access. Today, it influences how teaching staff might respond to students when they reach the academy, whether people who look like them are directed to additional support services and whether their home culture, which is a fundamental part of who they are, is valued and respected (Michael, 2012).

A perfunctory search within journal repositories and the leading journal of LD (*JLDHE*) did not yield a body of literature. Moreover, the premier text on learning development, *Learning Development in Higher Education*, failed to explicitly engage with race (Hartley, Hisldon and Keenan, 2010). Though this text acknowledged the impact of diversity on HE, there was not more than a passing reference to a conference paper written by Lillis (1999).

This reference led me to the academic literacies (AL) approach, which 'analyses texts to explore and reveal socio-economic, socio-cultural, and critical-discourse based perspectives' (Richards and Pilcher, 2018, p.162). There is considerable promise in this field of inquiry to lay the foundations for developing race-conscious discourses within LD. This is even more the case with the South African variant of AL, which does not shy away from issues of race-consciousness and decolonisation (Lillis et al., 2015). Through the AL approach, it is possible that expressions of race can be fused into the discourse around LD in UK universities.

Until the promise of AL is fulfilled, it is worth contemplating why the relationship between race and LD has been so distant. LD is a relatively young and developing field. Race is but one of the issues that LD has failed to fully engage with. As the diversity of LD practitioners increases, so will the diversity of LD's theory and practice. Thus, studies that fail to engage with issues should not be considered blameworthy. Learning developers are not alone in their inability to think or talk about the critical role race plays in the teaching and learning process; LD is simply a reflection of the broader slow-moving pace to theorise about race in UK HEIs (Milner and Laughter, 2015). The slow-moving pace is not helped by the fact that LD theory and practice lean towards umbrella issues under which race may fall under, rather than focusing on race explicitly. We see this in discussions about widening participation, new entrants, inclusion, diversity, equality, non-traditional students, access and participation, social deprivation, and inequalities:

Within the current socio-political context, it is unusual to name race, racism, or racial injustice so explicitly. Such language is politely subsumed within palatable umbrella terms Race or racism is seldom named or foregrounded, thus serving to maintain a racially sanitised norm which benefits whites and marginalises faculty, staff and students of colour. In this context, attempts to explicitly name or foreground race and racism are silenced or reworked and rebranded in an effort to preserve the institutional image as neutral, colour-blind and progressive. These acts of brand management do not challenge whiteness rather are preoccupied only with protecting it whether through inadequate forms of action or, as with the senior colleagues in the scenario above, inaction and avoidance. (Arday and Mirza, 2018, p.322).

At this point, it is unclear to what extent the above reasons explain the absence of race. Nevertheless, what is important is that developers awake from our unconsciousness because of the unique position that we hold in the academy. Hartley, Hislodon and Keenan note that learning developers are uniquely placed in 'mediating roles between the experience of students, the goals of academics, and the ambitions of our HE institutions' (2010, p.24). As the link between learning development (student-facing support) and academic development (staff-facing support and professional development) strengthens, more learner developers will be called upon to support the professional development of the teaching and administrative teams. This presents an opportunity for learning developers to propagate the importance of understanding one's privilege and positionality into the heart of the academy. Also, all UK HEIs are afflicted by the 'award gap' between the proportion of white British students receiving 'good' degree classifications compared to UK-domiciled students from minority ethnic groups. Since, LD work is directed at these 'new' entrants, we often have to engage with significant numbers of students of colour who have been failed by the academy; it would be prudent of us to understand our positionality and the backgrounds of our students so that we do not replicate the same problematic institutional practices that led them to our doors (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Reflection on 'unconscious' learning development.



Figure 2 is an LD advertisement for an introduction to critical thinking course at a prestigious UK university. It can be interpreted in a number of problematic ways; the advertisement states that 'critical thinking is a vital skill' which can be obtained if students 'prepare for university now'; therein situating critical thinking as a cognitive skill outside the student. This notion is reinforced with a picture of a black student striving to think critically

like the exalted *Thinker*. Rodin's *Thinker* is solitary, masculine, and European; this is 'not accidental', but reflects a specific embodiment of the critical thinker along masculinist and European lines (Thayer-Bacon, 1998; Thayer-Bacon 2000; Danvers, 2016, p.48). There is no allegation of racism for the creators of this advertisement, far from it; instead, it appears to be indicative of the unconsciousness of LD, which has led to the perpetuation of the status quo. Nonetheless, I am curious about the LD team's design choices; why was the student selected? Is this the type of student most in need of these types of introductory courses? Why the *Thinker*? Why not a real person like Angela Davis or Stuart Hall? What message did they want this advertisement to send?

Modelling race-conscious pedagogy in learning development

Moving from theory to practice, I will sketch a model that embeds race-consciousness into LD sessions. This model will be referred to as a pedagogy of race-consciousness (PRC). The PRC has four foci: LD-focused, assessment-focused, dialogic-focused, and critical thinking-focused.

1. **LD-focused:** It is envisioned that PRC would work best in the hands of learning developers because PRC is best harnessed by those whose core focus is to empower students as they are. Developers truly meet students where they are – though many educators profess this, developers generally embody this; learning developers construct sessions in which students can confidently contribute without needing to engage with a prescribed reading list or be conversant with the received theory.
2. **Assessment-focused:** Though PRC owes much to Tatum's idea of a race-conscious society, its central goal is far earthlier, that is, to empower students to approach an assessment task confidently or, more broadly, obtain a good degree. If students leave the classroom with a 'positive sense of racial/ethnic identity not based on assumed superiority or inferiority' (Tatum, 2001, p.53), then this is an appreciated bonus, but it is not the central goal. This is because students who engage with LD are largely 'non-traditional students' who tend to pursue higher education for career-oriented and pragmatic reasons. Therefore, educators must put such goals at the centre of their sessions 'even if we incorporate other goals as well' (Durst, 1999; Gorzelsky, 2007, p.431). Considering that developers largely

encounter non-traditional students, who will leave university with at least £30,000 debt, their goals, no matter how pragmatic or shallow, must be respected. It would be unprincipled to deliver sessions with other goals in mind, no matter how noble these goals may be. This is what differentiates PRC differs from critical, disruptive, emancipatory, and feminist pedagogies; by encouraging students to tackle oppressive elements in their lives, educators 'are in fact, imposing our goals on students rather than doing what we are ethically obligated to do as teachers – to support students as they pursue their own goals' (Smith, 1997; Gorzelsky, 2007, p.431). Moreover, the non-alignment of the pragmatic ambitions of students and the agenda of the activist teacher could lead to a 'collision course' in which neither party achieves its goals (Durst, 1999; Wallace and Rothschild-Ewald, 2000; Gorzelsky, 2007).

3. **Dialogue-focused:** Due to the sensitivity of the content and the wide variety of students' lived experiences, PRC will most likely falter if expressed through a monologic or banking mode of instruction. PRC is rooted in enabling understanding to take place through dialogic communication. This dialogue occurs in the 'middle space between students' own experiences and the expectations of the discourse communities in which they will have to achieve voice' (Wallace and Rothschild-Ewald, 2000, p.3). There is no agenda, implicitly or explicitly. Rather, the pedagogue wants himself or herself and the classroom to arrive at an understanding where multiple streams of consciousness flow without fear of epistemic violence. Boler noted that our ethical responsibility is to listen with 'equal attention to all views and perspectives' (1999, p.179). Without this consideration, 'too much discomfort may be counterproductive to learning and possibly unethical' (Applebaum, 2017, p. 863).
4. **Critical thinking-focused:** Critical thinking is just one of the many areas covered by learning developers, but it offers the best entry point for PRC (Danvers, 2016). As discussed, 'race-talk' is most comfortable in the realm of critical thinking. There are also practical reasons; most areas of academic practice covered by developers, like referencing and paragraph structure, are too static, fixed and narrow to accommodate PRC – it will most likely seem forced and not entirely clear to students how to make connections. Also, significant importance is given to critical thinking by universities (Barnett, 1997; Danvers, 2016). Arguably, it is one of the few areas of student development where universities appreciate the difficulties.

Thus, there may be more of a willingness to provide opportunities for novel practices.

PRC is delivered through a simple three-step process: (1) intrigue; (2) connection; (3) tangibility (see Figures 3 and 4):

- (1) The facilitator intrigues the students by starting the session with discussion points around a provocative scenario. This scenario has within it a problem or controversy that requires the class to draw from their lived experience to address it.
- (2) The next stage is establishing a connection between our intriguing discussion and a specific academic practice. In other words, the facilitator establishes a 'bridge' from the students' lived experiences to what is expected of them in their discourse communities. The facilitator needs to make this 'bridge' as simple and explicit as possible to enable students to recreate their own 'bridge' when they are alone writing their essays. Wallace and Rothschild-Ewald, refer to this as the facilitation of 'interpretive agency', which involves 'bringing one's prior experience to bear in the construction of knowledge' (2000, p.16).
- (3) The last stage is tangibility; given that the goal of PRC is to approach an assessment task confidently, it is important that students see an actual example. This way, they see the entire journey from dialogue to the 'finished product'. Moreover, a tangible example is needed for students to review, deconstruct, and evaluate (Wallace and Rothschild-Ewald, 2000).

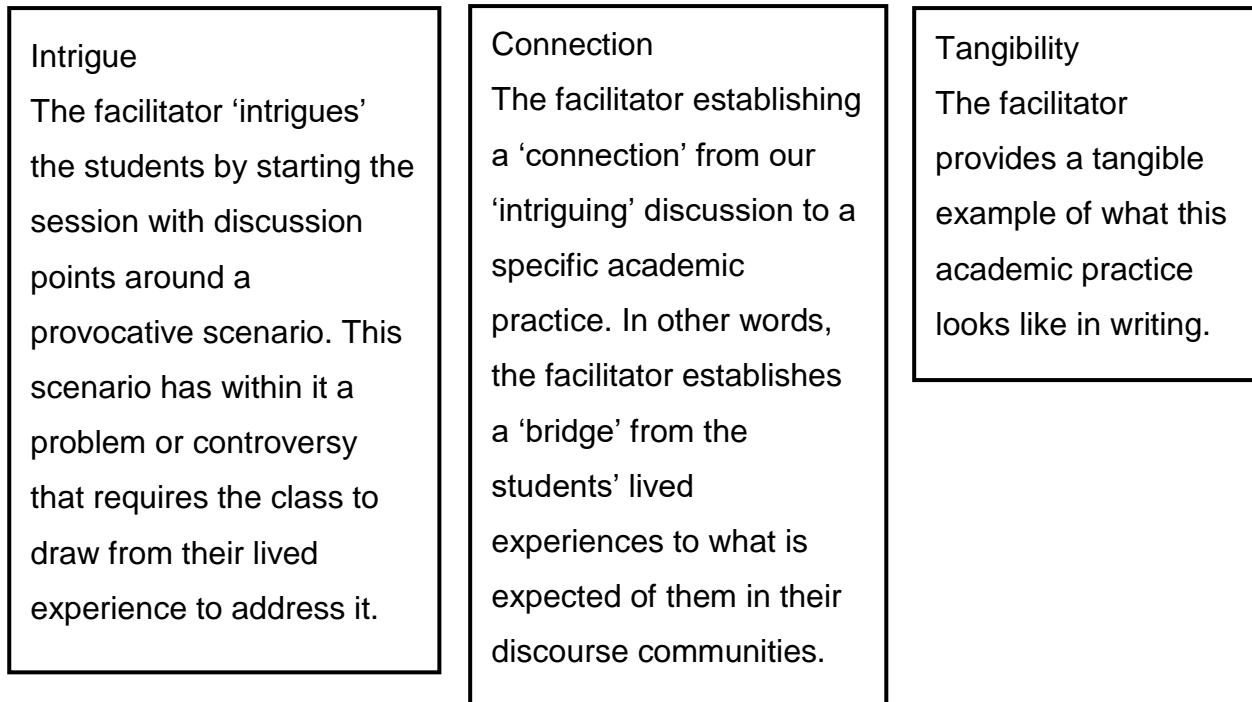
Figure 3. Model of PRC.

Figure 4. Example of PRC.

Context

The formative assignments revealed that the undergraduate students' case studies were marred by compounding different ideas in the discussion section of their 'mock' dissertation. It appeared that students struggled to separate their ideas into coherent sections. A means to remedy this was to deliver an introduction session to thematic analysis.

Intrigue

Present a provocative image and ask students to state a keyword to describe the image and any undertones. Prompt a fuller discussion about the keywords that were stated.



Connection

Explicitly connect the activity of stating keywords to the academic practice of thematic analysis. The facilitator explains that their keywords were in effect 'themes', which could be expanded upon. Rather than conflate or compound their observations, they can discuss each keyword or theme separately. Each of the keywords or themes has a 'life of its own'. Prompt a discussion about their process of conjuring keywords: 'if I had asked you to conjure "themes" instead of "keywords" would it had been as easy? What are the benefits of separating your work into themes? Why is separating your work into themes considered evidence of critical thinking?'

Tangibility

Provide a written example of arranging observations into themes. Prompt a discussion about the written example; 'What do you think? What is positive about this approach? Anything that you could improve? Perhaps the written example is a bit boring – any ideas to "spice" it up?'

The difficult road ahead

PRC is not without its difficulties. There are two significant challenges for PRC. First, the rise of online learning in higher education presents a unique challenge for educators committed to affective pedagogies. It remains to be seen how well affective pedagogies translate to the online classroom (Boyd, 2016). This is a particularly important consideration given that 'we learn, we teach, we know with our entire body. We do all of these things with feeling, with emotion, with wishes, with fear, with doubts, with passion' (Freire, 2014, p.3). Harnessing students' lived experiences is best attempted with care, consideration, and intimacy (Anderson, 1979; Thweatt and McCroskey, 1996; Baker, 2004). Moreover, the hurdles of the 'digital divide' and 'digital literacy' make it difficult to see PRC deployed in an online environment in any meaningful way (Boyd, 2016).

The second consideration is more of a dilemma that the pedagogue must wrestle with. Should he or she seek to comfort the potential discomfort? On the one hand, it is unlikely that PRC will cause a great deal of discomfort because it is unconcerned with advocating a particular perspective, rather it is rooted in creating an understanding of varying perspectives (see Figure 5). As Boler states, 'a pedagogy of discomfort is not a demand to take one particular road of action. The purpose is not to enforce a particular political agenda, or to evaluate students on what agenda they choose to carry out, if any' (1999, p.179).

It is also worth noting that some discomfort should not always be regarded as problematic. There is this 'universal expectation' that education must create comfortable environments for students (Applebaum, 2007). However, it can be a necessary catalyst for growth and learning (Boler, 1999; Kumashiro, 2002; Mayo, 2002; Berlak, 2004; Applebaum, 2007; Zembylas, 2015). Felman insists that 'if teaching does not hit upon some sort of crisis . . . it has perhaps not truly taught' (Felman, 1992, p.53; Butler, 2004, p.136). Moreover, the individuals that are most likely to feel discomfort are those who most benefit from being colour-blind.

Figure 5. Reflection on managing discomfort.

When delivering sessions that engage with affective matters, I anticipate moments of discomfort that may take away from the goal of the session, so I keep the picture on the left in my PowerPoint slide deck. I explain to the students that goal of this session is to reach an understanding. Understanding is represented by the sun. This sun that I'm trying to show you is something desired by all of us. We all want to understand, we all want to bask in the sun. However, the means of reaching this understanding may cause issues and it may cause disagreement. The means is represented by the pointing finger. The finger is simply a means to get us towards understanding. I want to show you the sun, so don't focus on the finger, focus on where the finger is pointing. The finger is imperfect and flawed, but I believe it will help us see the glorious sun.

The demands for comfort are not neutral; 'teach me' and 'care for me' are manifestations of privilege and reassertions of power. Thus, Leonardo and Porter (2010) assert that when we observe the safety of those who benefit from being colour-blind, we inadvertently squander the opportunity for those who want to grow, learn and move out of their comfort zone (Leonardo and Porter, 2010, p.140).

On the other hand, race is race. Attempts to speak frankly about race are 'fraught with risk and challenge' (Arday and Mirza, 2018, p.319). Leonardo and Porter state that by sharing your real perspectives on race, you may become a target of personal and academic threats (2010, p.140). You put yourself at risk of violence and at risk of being conceived of as illogical or irrational. Thus, the pedagogue, particularly the pedagogue of colour, must

decide whether or not to place comfort as their central consideration. It would be inconsiderate for me to urge my fellow pedagogues, particularly the pedagogues of colour, to allow for some discomfort, therein jeopardising their well-being and possible career progression.

Parting words

It is hoped that this discussion on race and learning development would encourage other learning developers to consider removing the shackles of neutrality in a manner that preserves their integrity, well-being, and chances of career progression. We are not empty vessels; we come to the academy with our rich lived experiences. Instead of casting them away before we enter the classroom, why not use them in our sessions to enhance the learning experiences of our students and also feel a sense of wholeness? It would be a pleasure to see a deeper engagement of race, class, gender, age, or neurodiversity in LD theory and practice. We may struggle to get it right and face resistance along the way, but ultimately, I believe we will be appreciated:

If you can talk to me in ways that show you understand that your knowledge of me, the world, and the 'right thing to do' will always be partial, interested, and potentially oppressive to others, and if I can do the same, then we can work together on shaping and reshaping alliances for constructing circumstances in which students of difference can thrive. (Ellsworth, 1989, p.324).

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