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What’s the Point? Anti-racism and students’ voices against Islamophobia.

Abstract

In a climate of Islamophobic racism, where media racisms saturates our TV screen and newspapers, where racism on the streets, on campus, in our community become everyday realities, I ask, what can we- teachers do in the work of anti-racism in education? In an attempt to raise these issues in a post 9/11 moment, this paper explores classroom debates on the real lived experiences of Islamophobia. These are important learning moments when students and indeed staff engage with the ‘race’ issues of our time. This paper suggests that classroom exchanges can help provoke in students critical thought and self-reflection. Such dialogue can become the material that informs anti-racist thinking in Higher Education.

This article explores the connections between student experiences and the wider social political issues and ideologies that create and re-enforce racism. The underlying interest for the writer is to examine the ways in which such classroom interaction; dialogue and exchanges can undo racist thinking and can inform anti-racist critique. This article reflects on two seminar discussions on media racism. Students drew on their lived experiences as they challenged the anti-Muslim racism from these sessions.

This article has three sections; first, in my attempt to open the dialogue for anti-racism, I explore the multicultural and anti-racist discourse within education. Part of this discussion is to chart its failures and gains and explore new theoretical debates and developments. Here I explore critical race theory (CRT) as a theoretical way forward. Second, I examine Islamophobia, the hatred of Muslims as a measurement of current racism. My interest is to explore the meanings of Islamophobia, and its relevance to students lived realities. I engage with media discourse as a way of pulling out the student views and lived experiences. Ethnicity and identity in education is crucial to this endeavour. In the final section I raise the question of ‘what’s the point of studying racism?’ I discuss anti racist discourse in view of the greater politics of social justice in education. Here I discuss a class seminar on the viewing of a DVD recorded role-play of a racist incident against a hijab wearing woman. The point here is to test students racialised and anti-racist views and reactions to Islamophobia. I make use of the student voice, counter narratives and perspectives, as a vehicle to challenging the racism. I conclude that classroom discussions can be the place where anti-racist, anti-sexist and anti-oppressive views emerge to form the discussion for social justice education.

Key words
Critical race theory, feminism, anti-racism, social justice education and student voice.
My Awakening to racism and anti-racism

In this introduction I begin with a reflection of my own student life and my political awakening that has inspired my anti-racism in education. In January 1981 I returned to college to resume my A level studies, my lecturer walked into class appearing very agitated and upset. He asked us: Does anyone know what happened this weekend? We looked at each other confused and no we did not. He then, rather angrily said, ‘you lot, call yourself politics students, yet, you do not keep up with national news, or with what is going on in your own city’. We had just been studying racism and black communities, and the political campaigning of ‘Black Sections’ in the Labour party. None of us knew what he was referring to. He then spread out, on our desks, the local and national papers for us to view. Fire ablaze, fire bombed teenagers party, thirteen dead in house fire, 13 youth died in a racist arson attack …….and so on. This was the first I had heard of the firebomb attack of a black teenager’s birthday party, which had taken place on the Saturday. I was of a similar age. I remember thinking, why? Who could have done this? What’s the point? For what? Immersed in a state of disbelief, I found myself thinking, this could have been my party, one of the dead could have been me, the 13 dead could have been my friends. A shiver of fear rushed through my spine. This was for me a moment of reality. Racism was not just the stuff of books, it was not about the far away and the long ago, it was the here and now, on our street, and in our homes.

The reading of these headlines and the subsequent articles were frightening to a teenage group studying the politics of racism. I remember thinking – this stuff is for real. Racism claims lives. This was my first awakening. I found myself asking repeatedly, who were the culprits? And what were the police doing? Questions of right and wrong, and of justice, became commonplace in our classroom. As students, our discussions grew stronger and stronger, which eventually developed into a student group campaigning against racism. Our first task was to mobilise for the national demonstration against racism.

On the 2nd of March 1981, I along with my A level class friends joined the march for justice for the 13 dead. As we lined up in Hyde Park, I remember very clearly and harrowingly, the 13 Cardboard coffins, each symbolizing the 13 dead children labelled with their names. I will never forget the emotions that overwhelmed me that day, the flood of tears that rolled down my face. Over 50,000 people went on this anti-racist march, the biggest mobilisation of black people in Britain to date; we marched for eight hours or more, shouting slogans: ‘Thirteen Dead and Nothing Said’, ‘No Police Cover-Up’, ‘Blood Ah Go Run If Justice No Come’. I felt moved with hurt and anger on this day, yet, I was also empowered by the activism of my friendship group. Anti-racism became real and taking action became a necessity. This was my political awakening.

My awakenings to the pain of racism and to the importance of anti-racist campaigns that proceeded, has impacted on my being. This transformation made me the feminist
and anti-racist teacher that I have become. Teaching and learning are not processes that can be detached from the real world. My practice in class, that is, my pedagogy is constantly reviewed by questions of social justice. This paper shares a couple of teaching sessions on racism and media issues as examples of how I do anti-racism in my class.

**The student becomes the teacher.**

Thirty years on from New Cross Fire, and now as a teacher of over twenty years, I continually seek out ways to raise the anti-racist critique in my classes. My aim is to educate and cultivate a learning environment where students feel comfortable exploring race and racism issues (House 2010). Fundamental to this endeavour is to explore teaching methods and material/content that challenges racism. Students’ participation in this learning is vital to my project against racism. To talk against racism and discrimination is to make minority voices central to the curricular, in this work students are encouraged to talk about their experiences and views of racism. I argue that student engagement in the classroom can be the beginning of changed thinking that can lead to actions against racism.

In this article I focus on a couple of classroom teaching and learning moments. The first class session explored media racism; we examined the different forms of media racism and then followed through a specific form of racism - that against Muslims or what is now referred to as Islamophobia. The class unpacked media messages and made links with the socio-political impacts of these messages. Here students drew on their own lived experiences and made sense of media racism. In the second seminar session, the class examined a short (five minute) DVD on Islamophobic racism on the street. Students were then asked to reflect on the clip and draw on their wider knowledge and experience of such racism.

I have been teaching race and racism as part of our sociology course at the University for over twenty years now; I have witnessed the changing face of racism and the student response to these changes. My teaching has reflected these changes. In the 1990s anti-black racism was the most dominant discussion in class. In the millennium, as our reality and the global socio-economic and political circumstances have changed, so have my teaching and learning references and materials. In a post-9/11 and 7/7 moments, students in my class have led interesting discussions surrounding Islamophobia. My current classroom debates often take me to these specific religious, cultural, as well as, racial references and experiences.

Teaching race and racism is probably the most difficult subject I teach. Why? Because minority ethnic students come to class, with their own version of history, their own understanding of social inequalities and their own experiences of discrimination. These students common –sense voice is often presented as all knowing, as real and authentic. Their sentiments are often loaded with ‘our racism is more serious and damaging, than yours’. I have heard African-Caribbean students say, ‘nothing compares with the days of slavery’, Muslim students say, ‘it’s the Muslims that are now being criminalized, and failed by the school system, our racism is more perverse’. These students draw from personal experience, sometimes informed by crime survey statistics, and headline news, but in the main, from their own lived experience of racism.
From multiculturalism to anti-racism – a critique in the making:

Before I turn to the current debates on anti-Muslim racism, I first reflect on the 1970s multicultural debate. The early attempts to make minority students and pupils more at ‘home’ in schools were first discussed within the discourse of multicultural education. Multiculturalism spoke of co-existence, integration, tolerance, diversity and learning about difference. Despite its efforts, multicultural education was quickly criticised for its tokenism and its deficit approach to black failure. It did not offer an education that was against racism, which linked the failures, exclusions and alienation of ethnic minority children to the overall structures of racism, instead, as said by J Solomos (in Cashmore, E and Bains, H 1988) multicultural education was

“..a reflection of the common-sense and policy notion that black pupils are the target group which policies should aim at since it is their ‘deficiencies and ‘problems’ that have to be overcome.” (p171)

By the late 1980s it soon became clear that this liberal multiculturalism was too patronizing and indeed reformist, to make a difference to the racism of the educational system. This critique paved the way for an anti-racist approach which advocated change beyond curriculum content and teaching process. The anti-racist critique argued that structural and societal inequalities and institutional racism was key to an understanding of ethnic minority educational inequalities. Gillborn 1990, 1995, Troyna and Carrington, 1990 Troya, 1988, 1991, Mac an Ghail 1999.) These developments in anti-racist education in Britain have been important, but as Gillborn (2006) argues, there is still a long way to go before anti-racist endeavours comply with the basics of the new race equality legislation (Race Relations Amendment Act 2002). He goes on to say :

“anti-racism has not failed – in most cases, it simply has not been tried yet’ (2006:17) he continues by suggesting that a ‘radical perspective is required to cut through the superficial rhetorical changes and address the more deep-rooted state of race inequality in the education system’(17).

This paper draws on these developments from the anti-racist movement and embraces new thinking that has been endorsed within Critical Race Theory.

Can CRT to it for We?

Critical Race Theory in education has its roots in legal scholarship, Derrik Bell, (199)Kimberly Crenshaw (1995), Richard Delgado (1995), and Patricia Williams, (1993), are often referred to as the founders of this movement. As with the British anti-racism movement there is no single statement of what CRT is, rather, as Gillborn suggests, CRT is a perspective that is growing, adapting and adopting new ideas. And as a perspective “it is a set of interrelated beliefs about the significance of race and racism, and how it works in western societies.” (Gillborn 2006:19) CRT is constantly developing and it involves a reciprocal dialogue between scholarship and activism.

CRT centres its concern with the continued racial discrimination and pedagogic issues, and highlights the importance of black cultural identities in its analysis of such
issues. To this end, CRT has a series of what Gillborn has called; defining elements and conceptual tools: - that racism is endemic and is deeply ingrained legally and culturally, and that objectivity, colour-blindness is false and that the experiential knowledge of people of colour should be welcomed via a ‘call for context.’ These elements have helped CRT scholars analyse racism in society and in particular in education. (for a full discussion, see Gillborn 2008)

One of the most relevant conceptual tools for my work on anti-racist education is that of counter-narratives. Here CRT’s insistence that ‘experiential knowledge of people of color’ is best understood from the micro – personal context, or in Delgado’s (1995) words, from within the ‘Call on Context’ – where the emphasis is on concrete personal ‘lived experience (xv). CRT scholars have established the use of narrative and story telling as central to connecting the voice of the victims of racism with the documenting of institutional, overt and covert, racism. Anti-racist education, therefore, examines not only the macro picture of policies, strategies, programmes, and related practice across the entire educational endeavour, but also focus’ on the micro picture of interpersonal behaviour, classroom interaction, participation, and related matters. This is where student voice and the use of Black and ethnic minority experience become imperative

CRT analyses social life through the lens of diversity, an education that is anti-racist then, is one that makes use of experiences from groups that have historically been marginalised in society. This approach values the viewpoints and the experiences of minority students, - this means to bring student experiences of racism and discrimination to the class. Here the use of narrative or voice is imperative to the making of knowledge. This is a controversial point. Although CRT holds a firm stance against notions of racial essentialism, CRT contends that the social realities of minorities (tized) give them experiences, voices, and viewpoints that are likely to be different from mainstream dominant narratives. However, to experience racism and discrimination does not guarantee that these experiences will be interpreted in a way that reveals their connection to larger social structures. The work of anti-racism, from a CRT perspective, requires that education does both: use material and content that is challenging, but also connects student narratives and experiences to make sense of the broader social world. As Fishman S, M, and MaCarthy, L says here (2005)

“Multicultural texts and students narratives need to be contextualised if they are to be instructive …(in a way) that helps students place their stories in broader historical, and /or philosophic contexts so they can forge connections between their views and of larger themes” (349)

CRT’s theoretical developments have provided me with a more radical critique of racism in education. CRT is both an academic discipline and a practise of resistance – praxis. In this sense CRT has, in my view, revitalized critical anti-racism in the way that offers a coherent and challenging set of insights and conceptual tools. This is particularly important, if as I suggest, learning about racism, is also about anti-racism and an education for social justice.

In the final section of this article, I return to CRT’s discussion of anti-racism and its connections with social justice issues. In the following section I explore media racism with specific reference to Islamophobia. Part of my endeavour here, is, to explore
student observations as they critique the raced/specific Islamophobic messages on mainstream media.

Islamophobia - *new right* racism in the media.

Britain is a socially and culturally plural society. Today the ‘ethnic minority’ population is diverse, with origins from countries including Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Caribbean and several African countries, and more recently, from Eastern Europe and the Baltic States. Within these varied nationalities, we have people from many different religious backgrounds. This new reality calls for new analysis. Today’s context requires that we consider the ‘new’ racisms of our time. One such reality is Islamophobia – anti-Muslim racism. The word *Islamophobia*, first coined in the late 1980’s, and in print in 1991 (Conway 1997) is racism based on the hatred of Muslims. This racism towards Islam has existed for centuries, and as Said, E (1981) reminds us, Islamophobia maybe a relatively new term, it is, however, based on a very old prejudice.

Muslim hatred has become more explicit and more extreme since 9/11. This racism relies, not on the debate of natural, biological inequalities, but on religion, ethnicities and cultural difference. This racism is justified by cultural difference, hence-unemployment, discrimination, poverty, marginalisation and indeed, criminalization of Muslims, are now viewed through ‘cultural lens’. Stolcke (in Fekete, 2006) has referred to this form of racism as cultural fundamentalism. Islamophobia, he argues, is a form of cultural racism. Cultural racism does not exclude and marginalised populations on the basis of their biological heritage, instead, it seeks to point out the incommensurable cultural differences. This is a closed view of Islam, which prevails in popular discourses on Muslims. Islam has and continues to be portrayed as inferior, primitive, violent, irrational, oppressive and undemocratic. This is juxtaposed with the West as civilized, reasonable, sophisticated, enlightened, and democratic. (Conway 1997)

There has been a plethora of research done on the media representation of Islam and Muslims. Media discourse is one of the primary arenas in which the debate concerning the discourse of ‘the Muslims/and Islam has been played out. The literature regarding media representations of Islam and Muslims generally cohere in their identification of a pattern of negative stereotyping, bias and underlying Islamophobia (Poole, 2002:43). Elizabeth Poole (2002:42) argues, “…Muslims are associated with militancy, danger and anti-Western sentiment” (Poole, 2002:42). Edward Said, although acknowledging there is no homogenous and unchanging reality called Islam, maintains that the media fails to at least provide a fair representation of Islam and its followers through a mixture of “ignorance, cultural hostility and racial hatred…” (Poole, 2002:42).

Indeed Said (1981:43) acknowledges this fact when he points out that:

…it is the media that form the ‘cultural apparatus’ through which Europeans and Americans derive their consciousness of Islam.

The media plays a fundamental role in the construction of knowledge and is a key source through which ‘we’ construct our identities in relation to the ‘Other’ (Van
The events of 9/11 and 7/7, together with the invasion of Iraq, Afghanistan, and the war on terror, have brought Muslims/Muslim identity to the forefront of global media. Since then an increasingly intense focus has been placed on the world’s Muslim population, and particularly those Muslims living in the West. For many Muslim women the wearing of the hijaab, and for men the beard or any other dress code associated with Islam, has provoked hostility. In Britain, the 7th July London bombings and the realisation that these acts were carried out by Muslims born and raised in the country, has led to increased anxiety concerning British Muslim youth (Abbas, 2007:8).

The press’ systematic reiteration of the threat from ‘the enemy within’ has lead to the more recent criminalisation of young Asian male (Macdonald, 2003:151). The press has succeeded in creating a moral panic concerning an internal terrorist threat and with this emphasis on ‘risk’ have constructed a new folk devil that of the young British Muslim male (Abbas, 2001:248). In the following section I refer to a class session on media representation of Muslims. These themes of the ‘terrorist youth’ juxtaposed with the passivism of ‘Asian Muslim females’ were explored in the class seminar.

Reading Islamaphobia – what the class of 2009-10 said.

In this part of the paper I refer to a discussion by second level degree students studying race and racism in the British context. This is an elective module, so participation is voluntary. The aims and objectives of the module examine the theoretical explanations to race and racism, the history of racism and the varied sociological studies of the different forms of racial discrimination. In the seventh week of the module, the class examined the racism and the racialisation process of the mass media. The class discussed the relevant media texts, particularly exploring the racist representation of non-European folks. Here a discussion of the mis-representation of the other was particularly useful in understanding the West/ East/Us/other discourse.

With specific reference to Islamophobia in the media we explored the messages and images of Muslims in the British press. We discussed headlines from local and national papers; we examined the use of loaded words and stereotypical images of Muslims during the aftermath of 7th of July suicide bombings. One particular theme that dominated class discussion was how religiosity and masculinity and femininity were played out by the media. A common theme that came through from these students was media representation of the ‘Muslim other’ as people that either posed a threat to the nation - the terrorists or as passive victims – hijaab dressed Muslim women. Central to both of these images, were notions of loyalty to the nation tired up to identity issues of Britishness and otherness. The following image (below) was chosen to kick start this discussion.
Methodological Issues and some findings:

The image above was projected on power point. I chose this image because of the class discussions around masculinity, femininity, Britishness and nationalism that were re-occurring in the class discussions on Islamophobia. Classes are typically structured with an hour of interactive lecture time, followed by seminar discussion and group activities. The lectures pointed to the sociological studies on Islamophobia in the media (Said. E 1981, Hafez, K, 2000, Poole, E 2002) the students were asked to read this literature ahead of the seminar discussions. The seminars are flexible and unstructured, with students working in discussion groups. Discussions are free flowing. The class worked in groups of four to five; they studied the image, the story and the headline references. The class were asked to share with their group their first views of the image.

Much of this discussion was within the groups. I circulated; observed and listened, I did not comment or participate but made mental notes which I then noted when I returned to my desk. These sessions usually lasts around 15 minutes. It is often in this later half of the two-hour session that the rich debates and discussion flows. This way of working during seminar sessions is my preferred activity. I find that students are more confident in smaller groups. Hence breaking up into small groups, where participation and contribution is far greater, gives me a better sense of the class perspective.

At the end of the 15 minutes of seminar discussion, students were asked to make notes on a shared sheet. Once the groups had completed their discussion, a student was nominated to feed back their group discussion. As the students shared their feedback to the class, the class were invited to intervene and indeed comment. At the end of this session the seminar presentation groups were asked to leave their sheets for me to observe. This is something I do often. It is my way of reflecting on the class issues, and observations. This for me is about recognising and indeed recording student voice from my teaching. Sometimes these notes are used in proceeding weeks or are used to develop my teaching generally. Collecting student notes and taking notes from student discussions, forms part of my teaching journal. This journal is central to my personal reflective observations of what I teach and how I teach. My reasons for this is to keep in check the issues as they arise for me to reflect on, but also to consider these issues in my own research endeavours.

The following are the notes from the collected sheets from this first seminar session. The first set of notes here refers to identity issues:

- This image( above) suggests the acceptable, - the right kind of Muslim, innocent, sweet little girl, as opposed to the wrong kind of Muslim - the terrorist.
- “ Muslims are portrayed as terrorists, we are born British and we also like to maintain our religious identity, and our nationality…
- Muslim identity here is questioned and seen as either part of Britain or against Britain.
- The image suggests the idea that the Nation state versus the ‘enemy within’.
- The image depicts violence through the racialisation of young Muslim terrorists.
• you are either against us or with us, is about whether you fit in, or not in England
• the two images are about what is .. good ,bad, innocent and violent

The following comments speak to the importance of studying media racism, because of the way media can influence perceptions, as said here;

• Studying race and racism in the media has given me an idea of how media works and how people in society get their racist views
• Some have negative views, which they have picked up from the media about extremism.
• I was not sure that Islamophobia was a form of racism, but by studying media messages and images it makes sense now..
• Many non-Muslims are not educated on Islam, they are dependant on media portrayal of Muslims.
• I think all this Islamophobia is mainly in the media...
• I was aware that this racism Islamophobia has affected people in the US. But it hurts to know it is also here in England.

The following comments suggest that Islamophobia in the media is a result of certain political interests and views, as said here:

• .. there’s an increase in islamophobia in the media. I think the media and the politicians are the worst.
• the media has fuelled fear in us, so the state can justify war on terror/terrorists and take away our civil liberties by introducing identity cards....
• Islamophobic racism is something that is promoted by politician’s as well as the media portraying Muslims in a bad light

The following comments talks to the impact of media stereotypes and scapegoats of Muslims, as said here:

• I believe 9/11 and the July bombings in London made people resentful about all Muslims....
• It is important to understand Muslims, and not to make stereotyped opinions (of them).
• .. 9/11 .. attack was far away in America, whereas 7/7 has scared people, young British Muslims are seen to pose a real threat to national security.
• this irrational fear of Islam and Muslim people has been caused by the recent terror attack and the way the news has portrayed Muslims in the media.

The following comments picked up on gender issues and gendered representation of the image:

• the media always focuses on police raids ,on Muslim men for suspected terror plots and things…but they never show Muslim women...when they do, it’s about how they’re oppressed by the veil...
• The media talks about how there’s a problem of radicalization among British Muslim male youth and how this makes them more susceptible to extremist influences but I think they’re stirring up fear, this has an effect on how Muslim men are perceived by the wider British public.
• Britain in post 7/7, has portrayed Muslim men in the media as kind of the ‘enemy within..
- I think people aren’t worried about Muslim women being radicalised because they think of them as weak rather than aggressive...

The following comment from a Muslim male student was shared in class, I took notes as he spoke.

- The problem I think is that the media tends to conflate increased religiosity among us youths as a sign of extremism but that’s not the case. I think as a Muslim man, the main way I experience the repercussions of 7/7, apart from media focusing on negative things, is in my dealings with the police. I do feel they target young Asian men more because of these new anti-terror laws. I do think the police do abuse these laws to vent their prejudices. I’ve been stopped before for no reason, and my car has been searched and even though they didn’t find anything the police were still really rude to me, swearing at me and things and I think it’s cos they just assume I’m hiding something.

The above notes were drawn from the first session on racism in the media, all but one, (the above) of the quotes, are from the collected group work sheets. This was an important seminar it revealed some of the student views that often do not get spoken of in wider class discussions. White, Black, Muslim and other voices interjected with their own experiences and views. Some of the comments here went beyond my expectations and had began to divulge issues that were beyond the issues raised in the lecture and in the seminar activity. Student voice here is evident of the richness of interactive participation and the knowledge gained from such engagement.

The following discussion draws from the second seminar on Islamophobia, here I wanted to follow the theme beyond media racism, I was interested to here whether students, as shared in the last quotation above, were either experiencing racism or had witnessed racist harassment. My interest here was to draw connections between anti-racist debates and wider social justice issues. My point here was to evaluate the extent to which students see the connections between their lived reality of racism with their study of racism. Indeed as with my own narrative at the beginning of this article, I was keen to discover whether, knowing about racism also means we act against it.

**What is the point of studying race and racism? Now you know about it, what ya going to do about it’...**

Teaching in an anti-racist way is, in my view, a political project. If we argue that the unequal structures, institutions and ideas of racism, and sexism and other oppressive ideologies, are articulated within society and has damaged our understanding and reasoning. Then a job (in my view) for the anti-racist ‘educator’ must be to undo these meanings and begin to challenge these processes. In this part of the article I explore the potential of anti-racism in the classroom context. This anti-racism, as Wagner says:

...seeks to deconstruct domination...(by) challenging unquestioned ‘truths’, broadening what is valued and foregrounding voices that had previously been silenced.” (Wagner (2005:261)

To nurture democratic sentiments and anti-racist thinking, we need to open out, as suggested by Wagner above, our classroom to an educational experience that is
challenging to discrimination and injustices. Part of this endeavour, is to draw on
student thinking and experience. Education for anti-racism is about making use of
material and content that is challenging, but it is also about making use of a diversity
of perspectives and experiences from our class groups. Content and critical
pedagogy is never enough to create anti-racism. What is needed, I argue here, is a
dialogic education method that invites student participation. Freire’s (1996) emphasis
on praxis-action and reflection – is pedagogically illuminating here, together with
CRT’s engaged learning method and counter-voice, we can begin a teaching and
learning experience that is critical to oppression and open to social justice. As Nagda
(2003) so clearly says here

“Reflection coupled with dialogue can foster a critical consciousness by which
students and teachers see their experiences situated in historical, cultural contexts and
recognised possibilities for changing oppressive structures.” (168)

I teach modules that explore Gender/sexism and Race/Racism; the literature invites us
to critically think of such oppression and discrimination in our communities. It is
therefore inevitable that my teaching invariably begins to ask social justice questions
of such issues. I try to be transparent on how I engage with the teaching that deals
with racism and sexism. I know my identity as a black Asian woman leads me to
affirm particular – anti-racist and anti-sexist views – and to challenge the raced and
gendered ones. Teaching is never a neutral act, we all have our biases, the point is to
be open about these and allow students to make up their own minds. This is a moral
and ethical challenge for me, I recognise, that if I think some views are oppressive
and wrong, it becomes my desire that my students also leave my classes thinking they
are wrong, so like McKenny (2005) I too would argue that my task in the classroom
is not ‘merely instructive’ but one that creates:

. …the kind of discursive space that is non-threatening and supportive of students
expressing their views…. my desire is to encourage a shift in perspective and that
such a shift is based on particular values … anti-racism and anti-sexism…under
these circumstance then, I cannot pretend that I have no desire to encourage my own
goals in the classroom” (2005):389

In the following, I explore student’s views on issues of race, racism and sexist
oppression as social justice issues. I was interested in our students political
positioning when confronted with racism. In other words, my question in this part of
the paper is, is studying race/racism and other oppressions only about writing essays?
Or as my personal story suggests at the beginning of this paper, should such racist
studies begin to also raise the potential for challenging such racism? In other words
should our teaching bring out the critical social justice issues of doing anti-racism? In
the final section of this paper I explore this issue.

Having spent seven weeks discussing race and racism I was now ready to discuss the
politics of anti-racism and social justice. In this eighth week of seminar I decided to
show a video clip on Islamophic racism. This is a five-minute role-play of a Muslim
woman being harassed in a shopping mall. There are three female actors, two actors
racially abusing the women with a hijaab, - an actor who plays the ‘Muslim women’. 
This role play is secretly filmed, the passers by in the shopping mall are not aware
that this was a faked incident; they were led to believe that this was real. The video
clip begins with the narrator asking this question: *Does wearing a headscarf affect how most people perceive Muslim women? And are they less likely to intervene to help women in distress who’s wearing a headscarf?* The narrator continues by saying failing to intervene does not break the law – but asks, *it is morally wrong to do nothing.* (see: [Islamophobia Test Islam People reaction to woman in Hijab](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RhIwLgNsfwI) ) Appendix 2

The following is the transcript of the role-play:
The role-play begins with the two female abusers making derogative references to the headscarf such as,

The abusers: ‘*Hey what’s that on your head? A tea clothe…nice tea towel, top fashion or what,- what she got to hide…..*’

The first passer by steps in and says:

*“Leave her alone…when interviewed by the cameraman, this women says:*

A female passer by; ‘*it was wicked, she looked so vulnerable” it wasn’t cos she’s black , or Indian, it was about the way she was dressed I could not just walk by…….*

The abusers ‘*do you fancy a bacon sandwich, hey Salman Rushdie’s, Satanic Versus, that was poetry in motion…that was….bloody terrorists they are..look at the way she’s dressed,. Looks like a bin liner… It’s our country.*’

A man who looks on and smiles. This was his response to the camera:

*If I see someone being harassed its non of my business – I think the British public are the sort of people who stand back and accept things as they are- I would step in if it got violent….*

Another male passer by said to: ‘*should they be allowed to be here and paused….em* he sniggered.

A second female passer by intervenes: She pulls the hijaab women away and confronts the racists. When interviewed and asked why she did so, she says the following:

*“When people abuse somebody because they are different, it’s wrong….I intervened because I think if you can speak up for other people who are experiencing that kind of harassment it’s important.”*

A male passer by intervenes ushers the abusers and tells them to stop. The role-play ends here.

At the end of the role-play the actors were asked how they felt about doing this sketch, here are their comments:

*We worked very hard at provoking attention; people should have given more attention to the abuse.*
The first lady was very upset, this was re-assuring, it felt good that people are prepared to not stand there and listen to this abuse.

I have watched this video clip many times now. I have led a number of anti-racist discussions at conferences and seminar presentations on the back of this video clip. I think it is a very important clip. The first couple of times I watched it, I found my self in tears, despite knowing that this was a faked incident a ‘role play’, it was still very painful to watch. After three or four times of presenting this clip to colleagues I found the courage to show it to my students. I pre-warned the students of the discomfort and pain it might course; I also shared the fact that I was in tears the first couple of times when I viewed the video. I was concerned of the Muslim students reaction and indeed the pain such a clip might provoke, I was also weary of the reactions of the non-Muslims who may at worse, ridicule the clip or indeed, disbelieve such racism. None-the-less, I still believed that the risk of unsettling the students was worthwhile in the work of anti-racism. As Wagner (2005) says below:

“anti racist pedagogy represents a shift from traditional university teaching practices and as such involves a changed of thinking that will necessarily be unsettling for some students, as it requires them to move beyond their comfortable, deep rooted views of the world”. (263)

In this desire to promote my political project of anti-racism I opted to take the risk, and show the video clip. There was a deadly silence immediately after the viewing of the video. I interrupted the silence by suggesting that students’ work in groups, but the silence convinced me that is was better to have a break. So I suggested we break for ten minutes. As I watched most of the students leave, I began to question whether I had done the right thing in showing the video. A few students, who remained in class, began to freely and openly engage with me about the video. This exchange reassured me. As the rest of the class returned from their break, I again invited them to reflect on the video, this time, I asked students to anonymously and independently make comments on sheets of paper for me to consider later. These were left for me to view. This is something I do as part of my reflective teaching, particularly, when group work and class discussion just do not feel safe and comfortable for debate. I like to keep in check the views and feelings of students in class, student’s comments, for me, are paramount in this reflective work. These collected student notes forms the student voice, which I then use for research purposes, and often for my own evaluation, and general course development purposes. The students are always made aware of this, and notes are always anonymous. The following are the notes left by the students at the end of this session: This is the ‘student voice’ from the viewing of Video

I have put the comments in categories, the first being about: Teaching about Islamophobia is important:

- **The topic of Islamophobia -anti-Muslim racism, is one, which should be discussed within the classroom. It would be good to see where these ideas originate from and whether it is something that can be reversed.**
- **It is important for students to know of the horrors of racism and it is real.**
• Ignorance is the main problem; I think that the issue of racism needs to be constantly discussed if we are to be able to make any changes...
• Being a Muslim I have experienced this kind of racism taunting, first hand, and I think it is good that the lecture raises these issues so other non-Muslims know what we Muslims go through.
• I left the room feeling vulnerable, and it reminded me that when we Asians are ‘out there’ we are all alone and there are very few strangers/people who will come to any ones rescue.

The second category I call ‘Taking action’ against racial harassment, here the students said:
• My thoughts initially was of confusion, as to why people did not want to intervene and stop the taunting.
• I believe that when people observe racism or discrimination taking place within society, people should intervene and tell them what is not right.
• I was deeply disturbed by the inaction of the passer bys; this highlighted for me the fact that racism is still rife.
• Racism should be challenged. When people witness racism or discrimination taking place, they should take a stand and tell others, what it is wrong.
• Not enough is done to challenge racism against Muslims.
• This racism should not happen, I like to think that after campaigns and legislation it will come to an end.
• I was not completely surprised by the reactions, as one man in the video said” Britain is a tolerant society ” everyone has a right to their views, I would intervene if it was physical.

This category refers to students disbelief that such racism really occurs, these students said:
• I was shocked to see such abuse,
• It should not matter what you look like, where you come from. One should be able to walk down the street without abuse
• I was shocked to see that so many people ignored the abuse
• This shows that racism still exists and many just care about their own situation
• I feel very bad for hijaab women that might have to go through such racist taunting, I think things will change eventually.
• I was outraged that a country that advocates religious freedom that this woman should go through this.
• It is sad, we are all different and it is wrong that some people are targeted for being different by racists.
• I was shocked to see that so many people ignored the abuse, this shows that racism still exists and many just care about their own situation
• racism is everywhere, it shouldn’t happen, but it does.....
• Even though I knew the actors were in a role-play situation it still disturbed me. I understand why people don’t intervene, because they’re
worried of what could happen to them. Even I would have to think twice before stepping in.

• The clip was very shocking and upsetting,
• It was awful to witness such racism
• But not all society is shocked by the religious dress

Only following two students noted that one of the passersby actually may have enjoyed watching such racist taunting the student said:

• ..it appeared that there were some who actually seemed to be enjoying what was going on.
• I was particularly shocked to find one man laughing . This showed that racism still exists and many people just care about their own.

Where do we go from here? Some concluding thoughts…..

Having reflected on the two class seminar sessions on Islamophobia and the student comments, I am convinced that the work of anti-racism in university classrooms is absolutely vital. Racism is real; people suffer physically, psychologically, socially, educationally and politically. Our work in university classrooms is just the beginning of this challenge against racisms and other oppressions. There are no short cuts or painless cuts; the work of anti-racism is a difficult one. As teachers we should make use of classroom exchanges, students’ self-formation is linked to these developments in the classroom. Student dialogue can be the key to promoting anti-racist discussion in our class. My goal is to teach in a way that engages students and leads them to reflect on the socio-economic political /religions issues that surrounds theirs (our) lives. Transformative social justice education is teaching and learning that calls on people to develop social and individual awareness. Through counter- narratives - teachers and students engage in self-reflectivity, enabling students to see the possibility for change - for personal and political transformation. Here engaged teaching brings together the world of classroom to the world outside, and as said by Nadga, (2003)

“The permeable boundaries between the classroom and the larger world can allow students to continually reflect on their in-class learning in relation to the outside and vis-versa. Engaged learning expands boundaries from inside the classroom to include student outside the classroom experience” 169. Nadga

I believe in making possible anti racist thinking in class. The student voice, that critiques mainstream thinking, is a starting point for this political work. And who knows, these exchanges may become (as with my own story ) the awakening for a bigger political project against the injustices in the outside world. CRT as said above has the potential for directing learners to this end. D Gillborn (1996) has suggested that we make use of CRT in our analysis of anti-racist work in education. He insists

“there is a great deal to be gained by a dynamic understanding of how antiracists and critical race theorists have approached certain issues and dilemmas. Both share a concern not merely to document but to change; they are engaged in praxis. “ p258
In conclusion I argue that the classroom where critical race exchanges and dialogues takes place, is the classroom where students and teachers can be transformed into active participants, creating, changing and transforming as they progress. In my view good anti-racist teaching must draw from the topics of our classroom talks and conversations, students views of the socio-political world becomes our teaching plan for our classroom material. I end by suggesting that in the current Islamophobic racism we have no choice but to rise to this challenge because:

“Islamophobia in education is perhaps particular repellent. Education can enlighten students and promote positive attitudes. Many studies in the social sciences have demonstrated that educated people are usually more tolerant. Education settings can be the first arena in which battles can be fought against Islamophobia. It is to education that our attention should be directed”.
(Sheridan, L, 2004:162 in Driel, B, Van)

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