

Equality, diversity and inclusion: learning from laying our cards on the table

Matthew Sillence

University of East Anglia, UK

Amanda Clark

University of Hertfordshire, UK

Claire Dickerson

University of Hertfordshire, UK

Hanh Doan

University of Hertfordshire, UK

Joy Jarvis

University of Hertfordshire, UK

Abstract

This article presents preliminary findings from a study designed to evaluate, develop and disseminate a cards resource developed to support dialogue and learning about EDI. Experience of creating cards to explore disciplinary thinking at the Universities of Hertfordshire (UH) and East Anglia (UEA) (Jarvis and Clark, 2020) was instrumental in the design. The resource is based on the concept of using '*serious play*', a 'special kind of intense learning experience' (Rieber et al., 1998, p.30, 29, original emphasis) to support reflective, inclusive and transformational learning (Peabody and Noyes, 2017).

Staff and students at UH and UEA who facilitate and attend sessions at which the cards are used are contributing to the research. Before sessions, facilitators are briefed about the guidance, the cards, and possible exercises for using them. At the end of sessions, facilitators and participants are invited to take part in a reflection activity. Facilitators are asked about the context, the activity, observations of participant response to the cards, their learning, the facilitator's learning, and plans for future EDI activities. Participants are

questioned about the role of the cards in their learning and thinking, what was learnt, and how this will impact their interaction with others.

Preliminary findings indicate how participants are thinking about their working contexts, in particular how they initiate conversations around their personal lives, and share stories relating to equality, diversity and inclusivity, in order to make abstract terms more vivid.

This study responds to a need to develop research-informed resources to use to encourage respectful, inclusive dialogue to address EDI topics with staff and students in higher education. Drawing on the preliminary findings shared here, new terms are being added to the current card set together with a blank card to allow users to generate their own cards; and a new resource comprising EDI stories is being considered.

Keywords: equality, diversity and inclusion; cards; conversation; dialogue; HE staff; students.

Background

Equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) are important and complex issues that need to be addressed in higher education. Internationally, universities have introduced culturally informed EDI strategies and policies, and provided training and activities for students and staff (Claeys-Kulik and Jørgensen, 2018). Such activities, and the environment in which they are used, need careful consideration, as EDI issues are often deeply personal, and exploring them with others can cause anxiety.

This article presents preliminary findings from a study that aims to evaluate, develop, and disseminate a cards resource previously created to support dialogue and learning about EDI. Experience of creating cards to explore disciplinary thinking at the Universities of Hertfordshire (UH) and East Anglia (UEA) (Jarvis and Clark, 2020) was instrumental in the design. The resource is based on the concept of using '*serious play*', a 'special kind of intense learning experience' (Rieber et al., 1998, p.30, 29, original emphasis) to support reflective, inclusive, and transformational learning (Peabody and Noyes, 2017).

The EDI cards were created by the UH School of Education Student Success and Engagement Team (SSET). They used a staff-student partnership approach to learning development (Bovill, 2020) to identify and agree the terms in the current pack (Figure 1), and worked with an illustrator to design the set. Finally, a member of the SSET prepared guidance on setting an ethical, inclusive learning context for using the cards (Clark et al., 2022). This guidance covers topics such as developing a 'safe space' (Holley and Steiner 2005, p.49), 'brave space' (Arao and Clemens, 2013, p.142) or 'classroom of disagreements' (Flensner and Von der Lippe, 2019, p.284); agreeing 'ground rules' (Jackson, 2014, p.56); deploying active listening skills (Kisfalvi and Oliver, 2015) and exercising compassion (Gilbert, 2017).

Figure 1. The set of 18 equality, diversity, and inclusion cards.



Research study

Individuals at UH and UEA who planned to run staff or student learning activities that had an EDI theme were invited to participate in the study. Before sessions, facilitators were briefed about the guidance, the cards, and possible exercises for using them. At the end of sessions, both facilitators and participants were invited to take part in a reflection activity. Facilitators were asked about the context, the activity, observations of participant response to the cards, their learning, the facilitator's learning, and plans for future EDI activities.

Participants were questioned about the role of the cards in their learning and thinking, what was learnt, and how this will impact their interaction with others.

Ethical approval was obtained, and potential contributors informed about the study aims, their role, and the management of their responses. Individuals were invited to consent to take part if they wish. As addressing EDI topics might cause psychological discomfort to participants, facilitators were apprised of ways of facilitating respectful dialogue and advised to provide information on sources of support. On completion of the study the researchers have been coding the responses to identify key themes that will inform the design of the cards and guidance resource.

Preliminary findings and discussion

In evaluating the EDI cards staff and student learning contexts, we present the preliminary findings from session participants, specifically what they learnt (Q1). Two themes of interest identified from three participants' (P) responses relate to terminology of the EDI card set and learning about the self and others through storytelling.

One participant noted 'That all of the cards interact with one another and also give rise to other "cards", e.g. cultural awareness came out of Language, as well as "Justice" as a potential card' (P6-Q1), suggesting that the limited word set had stimulated and not confined their thinking. The prompts from participants and their facilitators have since given rise to eight new cards, and a 'blank' card, which allows individuals to define their own terms in future activities.

In the following responses, participants highlighted the reflective and personal nature of the dialogue associated with using the cards and the opportunities provided for learning about themselves and others.

I learnt a lot about my colleagues as the cards were a great resource for engaging in conversations about diversity and inclusion issues in our personal lives (P7-Q1)

I learned a lot about the team. A lot of issues and stories were shared with everyone (P9-Q1)

This participant (P9) also noted in relation to a second question about the impact of the cards on interactions with others (Q2):

'I think it's an interesting exercise in self reflection ... It's effective in bringing EDI issues to life with stories and examples, instead of treating it as an abstract thing and could show individuals that they could have personal motives that are already EDI related.

Stories, '*constructions* that give a meaning to events and convey a particular sense of experience' (Carter, 1993, p.8, original emphasis), have been used when teaching inclusion to show 'that there are different ways of viewing and experiencing the world' (Jarvis and Iantaffi, 2006, p.80). They continue to be used for EDI learning and practice development (for example, Saleh et al., 2014; Chrysostomou and Symeonidou, 2017; Harrison-Train et al., 2021).

The participants' responses about their colleagues 'personal lives' are also reminiscent of Holley and Steiner's (2005, p.55) reports of the benefits of a multi-perspectival learning experience in a 'safe classroom'.

Implications for practice

This study responds to a need to develop research-informed resources to use to encourage respectful, inclusive dialogue to address EDI topics with staff and students in higher education. Participants have already suggested new cards, such as 'Justice', leading to a revised guidance resource, which includes ideas for setting up activities. The EDI set now includes a blank card, allowing users to generate their own terms and images. The importance of storytelling in offering multiple perspectives based on lived experience is also being considered to frame conversations in different contexts, such as the members of a staff team, or amongst small groups of student representatives. Further analysis of participants' and facilitators' responses is being undertaken.

References

- Arao, B. and Clemens, K. (2013) 'From safe spaces to brave spaces: a new way to frame dialogue around diversity and social justice', in Landreman, L.M. (ed.) *The art of effective facilitation: reflections from social justice educators*. Sterling, Virginia: Stylus, pp.135–150.
- Bovill, C. (2020) *Co-creating learning and teaching: towards relational pedagogy in higher education*. St Albans: Critical Publishing.
- Carter, K. (1993) 'The place of story in the study of teaching and teacher education', *Educational Researcher* 22(1), pp.5–12. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X022001005> (Accessed: 18 November 2022).
- Chrysostomou, M. and Symeonidou, S. (2017) 'Education for disability equality through disabled people's life stories and narratives: working and learning together in a school-based professional development programme for inclusion', *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 32(4), pp.572-585. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2017.1297574> (Accessed: 18 November 2022).
- Claeys-Kulik, A. and Jørgensen, T. (2018) *Universities' strategies and approaches towards diversity, equity and inclusion—examples from across Europe*. European University Association. <https://eua.eu/resources/publications/311:universities%E2%80%99-strategies-and-approaches-towards-diversity,-equity-and-inclusion.html> (Accessed: 27 June 2022).
- Clark, A., Dickerson, C. and Jarvis, J. (2022) 'Creating inclusive learning environments', *LINK*, University of Hertfordshire. In press.
- Flensner, K.K and Von der Lippe, M. (2019) 'Being safe from what and safe for whom? A critical discussion of the conceptual metaphor of "safe space"', *Intercultural Education*, 30(3), pp.275–288. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2019.1540102> (Accessed: 18 November 2022).

- Gilbert, T. (2017) 'When looking is allowed: what compassionate group work looks like in a UK university', in Gibbs, P. (ed.) *The pedagogy of compassion at the heart of higher education*. Springer: Switzerland, pp.189-202. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-57783-8> (Accessed: 18 November 2022).
- Harrison-Train, C., Marock, C. and Field, S. (2021) 'What's your story?' Building diversity, equity, and inclusion. *The Thinker*, 87(2), pp.32-36. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.36615/thethinker.v87i2.530> (Accessed: 18 November 2022).
- Holley, L.C. and Steiner, S. (2005) 'Safe space: student perspectives on classroom environment', *Journal of Social Work Education*, 41(1). Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23044032> (Accessed: 7 January 2021).
- Jackson, R. (2014) *Signposts: policy and practice for teaching about religions and non-religious worldviews in intercultural education*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/282656989_27Signposts27_Policy_and_Practice_for_Teaching_about_Religions_and_Non-Religious_Worldviews_in_Intercultural_Education (Accessed:18 November 2022).
- Jarvis, J. and Clark, K. (2020) *Conversations to change teaching*. St Albans: Critical Publishing.
- Jarvis, J. and Iantaffi, A. (2006) "'Deaf people don't dance": challenging student teachers' perspectives of pupils and inclusion', *Deafness & Education International*, 8(2), pp.75-87. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1179/146431506790560184> (Accessed:18 November 2022).
- Kisfalvi, V. and Oliver, D. (2015) 'Creating and maintaining a safe space in experiential learning', *Journal of Management Education*, 39(6), pp.713–740. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1052562915574724> (Accessed:18 November 2022).

Peabody, M. and Noyes, S. (2017) 'Reflective boot camp: adapting LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® in higher education', *Reflective Practice*, 18(2) pp.232-243. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623943.2016.1268117> (Accessed:18 November 2022).

Rieber, L. P., Smith, L. and Noah, D. (1998) 'The value of serious play', *Educational technology*, 38(6), pp.29-37. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44428495> (Accessed: 4 July 2022).

Saleh, M., Menon, J., and Clandinin D. J. (2014) 'Autobiographical narrative inquiry: tellings and retellings', *LEARNING Landscapes*, 7(2), pp.271-282. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.36510/learnland.v7i2.665> (Accessed:18 November 2022).

Author details

Matthew Sillence is Associate Professor in Humanities for Postgraduate Education and Training at the University of East Anglia. He works in doctoral education, focusing on the experience of postgraduate researchers and the professional development of academic supervisors.

Amanda Clark is a Student Success and Engagement Senior Advisor in the School of Social Sciences, Humanities, and Education at the University of Hertfordshire. With a focus on wellbeing for learning, she provides pastoral support and academic skills through individual and group tutorials and whole class seminars.

Claire Dickerson is a Research Fellow at the University of Hertfordshire. Claire's research interests include pedagogy, professional learning and development and developing policy and practice, particularly through collaboration.

Hanh Doan is a Student Success and Engagement Adviser (BAME/Equality Champion) in the School of Social Sciences, Humanities, and Education at the University of Hertfordshire. She delivers individual, group and class tutorials for academic skills and wellbeing. Hanh is also a Visiting Lecturer and Tutor for Initial Teacher Education.

Joy Jarvis is Professor of Educational Practice at the University of Hertfordshire. She works with colleagues who are new to teaching in HE and with researchers who are undertaking practice-based doctorates.

Licence

©2023 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>. Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education (JLDHE) is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE).