

# A dialogical approach to teaching sensitive topics – the case of addressing privilege and racism in a predominantly white higher education classroom

**Ahrong Yang**<sup>1</sup>, Department of Culture and Communication, Aalborg University

**Iben Jensen**, Department of Culture and Communication, Aalborg University

**Ulla Højmark Jensen**, Department of Culture and Communication, Aalborg University

## Abstract

This article examines how dialogue circles can facilitate critical engagement with sensitive topics, such as racism and privilege in a predominantly white higher education classroom. Drawing on a situated pedagogical intervention, the study explores how dialogue circles support collective knowledge production, embodied learning, and democratic participation when teaching sensitive and politically contested topics. The analysis highlights both the pedagogical potentials of dialogue circles, such as fostering vulnerability, care, and critical reflection, and the challenges involved in navigating power dynamics and student discomfort. The article contributes to university pedagogy by demonstrating how dialogical teaching can destabilise traditional hierarchies and support engagement with structurally embedded forms of inequality.

## Introduction

This article addresses the challenges of teaching ‘sensitive topics’ in higher education classrooms. Sensitive topics refer to topics that can evoke strong feelings and responses, due to how they are structurally politicised. In this article, issues about racism and racialised privilege serve as case for sensitive topics. Especially when addressed in a predominantly white context. While this article focuses on one case of facilitating dialogue circles, these key challenges have been identified through a collective of several years of higher ed teaching. The specific context of the experiment with dialogue circles is a master’s programme course about learning in intercultural contexts, in which the students are introduced to theoretical perspectives on racism, discrimination, in- and exclusion. The authors of the articles have an in-depth knowledge of the master’s programme. All three authors are or have been closely affiliated with the programme for many years as teachers, supervisors, and coordinators. When exploring how dialogue circles can serve as a useful pedagogical tool when teaching sensitive topics, we also join forces with research fields of affect theory and racialisation (author 1), interculturality, and equality (author 2), and dialogue approaches and dialogue circles (author 3). With the article’s focus on racialisation, it is also important to mention that we are a racially mixed author group; author 1 is ethnic Danish and brown, while authors 2 and 3 are ethnic Danish and white.

In Danish higher educational settings, the student body is predominantly white Brygger (2021). Findings show

---

<sup>1</sup> ahya@ikl.aau.dk

that 7% of the students in higher education in Denmark are non-white. In this case, we estimate that 5-10% of the students in this specific programme are non-white, while half of the teacher collective are, unusually for a Danish higher ed institution, brown.

What we have experienced when teaching at this programme is that when it comes to teaching about deeply embedded structural issues such as racism and privilege, it is pedagogically and didactically challenging. We have identified that when white students are confronted with literature on racism and privilege, they often express varying perceptions of the relevance to their personal lives and future careers. This is typically reflected in the students' readings and engagement with the literature that addresses marginalisation, e.g. norm critical pedagogies and racialisation. While the white students find it difficult relating to the theories and texts presented to them about racism, racialised experiences, and privilege, interestingly, at the same time, it is the first time many of the racially minoritised students are presented with academic texts that validate their subject position. Hence, making it easier for them to connect the concepts and perspectives in literature to their lived experiences. Conversely, for many white students, this is also their first engagement with theories that not only decentre their racialised white position but also critically highlight that they, too, have a racialised subject position. These theories challenge the notion of their position as neutral, universal, or superior (Ahmed, 2013; Wekker, 2016).

In this context, dialogue circles might be a useful pedagogical tool for embodiment and critical engagement. Particularly when the ambition is to engage with these topics as embedded structural issues rather than abstract concepts. In this article, we will present our experiences from a situated intervention, where we invited students to participate in dialogue circles – an alternative to the more traditional class and lecture format they are used to.

The article is structured as a situated intervention; which, inspired by Donna Haraway, means that we acknowledge the importance of situating the knowledge we bring to the table; definitions of key concepts; racism, dialogue circles, etc.; as we see all these factors as part of the answer to the question: What can we learn from an intervention with dialogue circles while teaching sensitive topics in a predominantly white higher education classroom?

It includes a description of the intervention, theoretical perspectives, and a discussion of the teacher's role in fostering critical and transformative engagement. While racialised privilege and racism are the case presented in this article, we join the broader field of university pedagogies, moreover, argue that dialogue circles can provide a space for engagement with other sensitive and politically contested topics, such as gender, religion, class, sexuality, etc.

### *Addressing racialisation and racism*

In this part of the article, we will address the specifics of racialisation and racism in this article.

When referring to racism and racialised privilege in this article, we draw on American sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's conceptualisation of race as a social category. According to Bonilla-Silva (2010), racial classifications and processes of racialisation operate through social structures that systematically privilege some groups while marginalising others. When we in this article use the phenotypical categorisations 'brown' and 'white', it is to emphasise how racial hierarchies are historically produced and continuously reproduced, shaping access to social, political, economic, and ideological advantages. We use 'brown' to describe students who are visibly racialised as non-white, for example, through wearing a hijab or being identified as, or identifying themselves as, non-white Danes. Conversely, students who are positioned as racially white are referred to as 'white'.

There has been a growing amount of research on race blindness in Denmark and other Scandinavian countries informed by white supremacy, postcolonialism, and Nordic Exceptionalism (e.g. Skadegård & Jensen, 2018; Danbolt & Myong, 2019; Skadegård & Horst, 2021; Smedegaard Nielsen, 2021; Yang, 2021), which we will not go further into in this article. Awareness of one's positionality is essential to engaging with issues of racism; however, this article is less concerned with the students' understanding and more focused on how dialogue circles can be a useful pedagogical tool to facilitate critical engagement with sensitive topics, such as racism and racialisation in a predominantly white higher education classroom, ideally fostering awareness of one's positionality.

Teaching these subjects in predominantly white spaces is emotionally demanding, compounded by the complexities of addressing systemic barriers to knowledge validation and legitimacy. Hence, navigating these challenges is a multifaceted effort. In our case presented, the teacher facilitating the dialogue circles is racially minoritised ([blinded for peer review]), while the other authors and observers of the dialogue circles are racially majoritised ([blinded for peer review]). This is relevant because teaching racism and privilege in predominantly white student spaces requires contending with systemic biases and the emotional toll of legitimising certain forms of knowledge over others, especially for racially minoritised teachers (Habel, 2011; Khawaja, 2022). For example, Swedish scholar Ylva Habel (2011) in her article "Challenging Swedish Exceptionalism? Teaching While Black", highlights:

"As a Black academic teaching predominantly White students about Black Diaspora, I recurrently need to face this challenge, which ranges from legitimizing the subject to "qualifying" my own presence in the classroom" (p. 107).

Similarly, Andreassen and Myong (2017) argue that systemic hierarchies shape perceptions of which knowledge forms are deemed valid, further complicating the teaching process. Hence carrying out dialogue circles and doing so with the specific purpose of addressing racism, the teacher's positionality is a central part of the knowledge production within the dialogue circle as well as in analysing the outcome and its potential to foster critical thinking, a commitment to democratic processes, and a sense of care for others. For instance, addressing the discomfort in talking about race and racism with reference to both personal bodily sensations, e.g. sweaty palms, as well as with reference to the literature the dialogue circles were centred around (Yang, 2021). While the teacher's positionality is a central part of the knowledge production, we also see potential in how dialogue circles provide a space for student-led and decentralised teacher learning.

### **Dialogue circles**

We have chosen to experiment with dialogue circles because they reflect our position in the field of learning and communication. Dialogue circles reflect social-constructivist theories of learning, referring to a Vygotskian tradition. This tradition views students as active meaning makers who can progress to higher levels of cognitive development through their interaction with the environment. Language is seen as a medium for communicating ideas as well as a primary tool for forming new ways of thinking and knowing (Vygotsky 1968). Vygotsky argues that "[e]very function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological)" (1978:57).

Engagement and activity from the students are crucial to dialogue circles. This aligns with Dewey's (1916) ideas of learning by doing. Dewey (1910) asserted that cognitive activity in school must be associated with reflective thinking, where serious and coherent consideration, rather than reproduction, must be at the centre of the educational setting. Lave and Wenger (1991) stated that thinking as well as learning is fundamentally seen as a

social process situated and embedded in communities of practice (Wenger 1998). The term situated practice refers to a dialogic approach to language (Bakhtin 1986; Linell 1998; Rommetveit 1996; Säljö 2000; Volosinov 1973). In opposition to monologic approaches where the teacher is seen as the one who knows and possesses the truth, the dialogic approach is born between people collectively searching for truth (Bakhtin 1984).

The effects of dialogue-based teaching are well-documented. International classroom studies have shown that dialogic teaching leads to a higher degree of understanding among students than monological teaching (Nystrand et al., 1997; Hansen et al., 2019). Engaging in a dialogue is essential to the development of the student's thinking and learning (Alexander 2017; Mercer & Littleton 2007). For example, researchers in the US have extensively studied the effects of collaborative reasoning, which builds on the same dialog-based elements as the concept of conversation circles. These studies (Reznitskaya et al. 2009), which show that learning outcomes not only consist of improved subject skills, but also long-term transfer effects, offer the following recommendation: "We suggest that the skillful use of classroom dialogue can help to externalize the rational processes, socializing students into the new ways of thinking" (Reznitskaya et al. 2009:44).

Furthermore, we have positive expectations (and experiences) to dialogue circles from former studies.

Two Danish upper secondary school teachers have developed dialog-based teaching concepts highly inspired by the Touchstones Discussion Project (Jensen 2019; Sørensen & Risbjerg 2018). Their concepts have been used in multiple upper secondary school classes since 2015. Although the teachers have not carried out systematic evaluations of the learning outcomes, one of the upper secondary school teachers carried out his own survey and found that his students had remarkably higher scores (above average) on their final exams if they had participated in the conversation circles (Jensen 2019: 50). Other variants of Touchstones Discussion Project have been developed tried out and evaluated in a smaller scale and on different levels (Absalon 2019; KGU 2016; Sørensen et. al., 2019).

In the following, we will elaborate on the specifics of dialogue circles as a useful tool for engaging with and learning about sensitive topics.

#### *Dialogical circle as an intervention for learning about sensitive topics*

Specifically, dialogue circles' ability to foster compassion and critical engagement with sensitive topics, such as racism and privilege, in a space in which marginalised lived experiences have been structurally silenced theoretically, scientifically, and in terms of the bodies occupying the spaces (students and teachers) (Khawaja, 2022). Pedagogical psychologist Iram Khawaja (2022) explores in her paper "Memory Work as Engaged Critical Pedagogy: Creating Collaborative Spaces for Reflections on Racialization, Privilege and Whiteness" how Memory Work can be used to bridge the gap between lived experience and knowledge production to foster critical reflection on silenced power dynamics of racialisation and whiteness. Khawaja contests that by turning to embodied experiences, memory work as an engaged critical method encourages students to reflect on their positionalities and embodied experiences to be able to analyse and destabilise the racialised power structures of knowledge production in higher education.

Inspired by the work of Khawaja (2022), the intervention and use of dialogue circles presented in this article serve as a form of engaged critical pedagogy aimed at deconstructing racialised structures. Dialogue circles offer a promising way to bridge these challenges by connecting social issues with theoretical understanding and emphasising collective knowledge production (Sørensen & Risbjerg, 2018). Grounded in dialogical teaching approaches, dialogue circles aim to foster critical thinking, a commitment to democratic processes, and a sense of care for others (Jensen, 2019). These objectives align with pedagogical perspectives rooted in decolonial,

feminist, and queer theories, which challenge dominant knowledge systems and emphasise transformative approaches grounded in lived experiences and social justice (hooks, 1994; Thomas, 2009; Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Ahmed, 2013). These frameworks advocate for a reciprocal relationship between theory and practice: theory enhances practice by making it more intentional, while practice makes theory more relevant and impactful through real-world application (Hooks, 1994).

The intervention presented in this article aims to create a learning space where students can actively embody these perspectives, effectively "practising what the literature preaches." Here the dialogue circles served as a platform to reframe racism and privilege as deeply embedded structural issues rather than abstract concepts. This approach empowered students to critically engage with complex themes and dilemmas, encouraging peer-to-peer dialogue and collaborative knowledge production (Cook & Tashlik, 2004; Sørensen & Risbjerg, 2018; Jensen, 2019). By fostering a collaborative learning environment, the dialogue circles aim to empower students to navigate the complex intersections of racism, learning, and teaching, while challenging traditional hierarchies by prioritising student-led dialogue over teacher-centred instruction.

## Methods

In this section, we will describe the intervention dialogue circles and reflect on the planning process. The empirical material was collected at a lecture with approximately 40 students in their second semester of a master's programme within humanities at a Danish university. The specific lecture was as mentioned part of a course where students were introduced to several different perspectives within the humanities and social sciences, and qualitative research methods. This session was titled [blinded for peer review] and had the following learning objectives:

- "1) Students are introduced to perspectives and theories that emphasise the role of emotions and feelings in society, challenging dominant understandings of knowledge as purely objective and rational.
- 2) Students gain knowledge of how knowledge rooted in lived experiences and emotions is produced and communicated.
- 3) Students gain insight and experience in connecting theories to practice." [translated from Danish] ([blinded for peer review])

While [blinded for peer review] facilitated the dialogue circles, the planning of the dialogue circles was discussed among all three authors. This with inspiration from Sørensen and Risbjerg's (2018) handbook on dialogue-based teaching. Moreover, the element of an inner and outer circle ('Fishbowl') was included as part of the dialogue circles decided by the facilitator. In the following, the different steps of the dialogue circles will be described.

### 1. *Preparing students*

As mentioned, the specific lecture was part of a lecture series where the students were introduced to different theories within the humanities and social sciences. The specific lecture in question was intentionally placed at the end of the semester, specifically after another lecture about postcolonial theory. Before the lecture, the teacher informed students that the class would differ from its usual structure and format. The teacher began the session by introducing dialogue circles, explaining their focus on collaborative discussion, where participants analyse and refine themes based on readings. The teacher explained that the focus would be on collaborative discussions, where the group would work together to analyse and refine themes, issues, and dilemmas based on the assigned readings. The assigned readings were the 'usual' literature, thus not 'customised' for the dialogue circles.

Drawing on Sørensen and Risbjerg (2018), the teacher emphasised how dialogue circles position students as co-creators of learning by integrating their lived experiences with knowledge production and collective knowledge. This approach challenges traditional classroom hierarchies, shifting the teacher's role to managing time and ensuring equitable participation. To prepare students, the teacher facilitated an introductory exercise: they individually reflected on intriguing aspects of the assigned literature (e.g. quotes or arguments) before discussing them in small groups. This exercise aimed at providing a foundation for the dialogue circles, encouraging familiarity with the assigned readings and creating a reflective mindset. Moreover, giving the students a chance to participate in the dialogue circles with the text more fresh in mind and for students who have not read the assigned literature before the session to give them – and the dialogue circle as a whole – better prerequisites.

### *2. Inner and outer circle (Fishbowl)*

The teacher structured the dialogue circles using a fishbowl format (Learning for Justice, 2024). Students were divided into inner and outer circles. The circles were structured with the participants in the outer circles sitting on chairs facing the centre of the circle, wherein the participants in the inner circle sat around a table facing each other and with their backs to the students in the outer circle. The number of participants in the inner circle at a time was six students. The inner circle engaged actively in discussions, while those in the outer circle listened. Participation in the inner circle was optional, with equal emphasis on listening and speaking (Sørensen & Risbjerg, 2018). Students could transition fluidly between circles, however, participants in the inner circles determined the flow, by standing up and picking a fellow student to change seats. The number of chairs (inner and outer circle) were the number of students + the facilitator (author 1), meaning that the inner circle at all times had six students participating. Only one participant in the inner circle was leaving at a time to maintain the flow of discussion. To ensure progression of the discussion, new participants were expected to build on the ongoing dialogue rather than revisiting earlier points.

### *3. Structure for the dialogue circles*

The session included three rounds of dialogue circles, each aligned with one of the assigned texts (will be presented). Each round followed this structure (Sørensen & Risbjerg, 2018):

- 1) Topic: A pre-defined topic or problem guided the discussion.
- 2) Text snippet: A relevant excerpt from the assigned text provided a shared reference.
- 3) Reflection questions: Two questions framed the discussion.
- 4) Introductory reflection: Students spent two minutes reflecting individually before discussing their thoughts with a partner for three minutes.
- 5) Dialogue circle: Six students began in the inner circle to initiate the discussion.
- 6) Meta-reflection: Open reflection about the progression of the dialogue circle.

This structure ensured that all students, regardless of their lived experiences or preconceptions, had the opportunity to contribute thoughtfully to the dialogue. By blending individual and collective reflection, the dialogue circles facilitated an inclusive and engaging learning environment.

### **Situated intervention**

This analysis frames how the intervention, the dialogical circle, structured the room in this specific intervention.

Our interest is to describe what happened in the classroom while changing the pedagogical form. As our main focus was the pedagogical restructuring and performance, the analysis will follow this interest.

*The assigned text used in the dialogue circles*

The pedagogical emphasis on destabilising power structures and fostering critical and transformative engagement is deeply rooted in decolonial, feminist, and queer theories. The literature informing this approach includes the assigned readings for the session where the intervention was conducted: Hooks (1994), Ahmed (2013), and Khawaja (2022). The texts collectively reject dominant forms of knowledge that are detached, hierarchical, and exclusionary. Instead, they advocate for relational, emotional, and collective approaches to knowledge production, emphasising the centrality of lived experience.

Ahmed (2013) foregrounds emotion as a crucial way of knowing, arguing that emotions are not individual but shaped by historical and cultural narratives. Similarly, Khawaja (2022) demonstrates how personal narratives of racialization, privilege, and whiteness can facilitate critical reflection and collective learning, showing that lived experience is integral to understanding and challenging systems of oppression. These perspectives collectively disrupt dominant knowledge systems that frame knowledge as objective, decontextualised, and purely rational, instead emphasising the transformative potential of embodied and relational ways of knowing. Knowledge practices are envisioned as grounded in care and an ethical responsibility to engage with others' experiences. Hooks (1994) highlights the need for theories that connect with live realities, particularly those of individuals and communities erased or silenced by dominant narratives. Hooks emphasises that compassion is essential for building transformative and inclusive intellectual spaces, making it a cornerstone of liberatory pedagogy. Together, these texts advocate for a reimagining of knowledge and pedagogy as deeply relational and rooted in collective experience and knowledge production.

The following section unpacks key insights drawn from engagement with and observations of the dialogue circles. As a facilitator rather than an authority figure, both challenges and opportunities in employing dialogue circles as a method for fostering critical engagement with racism and privilege in predominantly white higher education spaces were experienced and observed. These reflections are organised around two central themes: *Facilitating vulnerability* and *Navigating power dynamics*.

*Facilitating vulnerability through dialogical structure*

Creating an environment where students feel comfortable to engage with sensitive topics is crucial yet complex. Dialogue circles offer a structured format that fosters vulnerability, compassion, and mutual respect among participants (Jensen, 2019). An example of this was one round of the dialogue circle, prepared by the teacher and inspired by the assigned literature, titled: "Hvad er frygt?" ["What is fear?"]. Using a text snippet from Ahmed (2013), which describes fear as relationally shaped through historical contexts, the teacher supplemented the discussion with a slide comparing media portrayals of the white Christchurch Mosque shooter and the brown Manchester concert shooter, portrait and represented in distinctively different: the white Christchurch shooter as an "angelic boy" with a childhood picture, whereas the Manchester concert shooter depicted as "pure evil" following a mugshot picture. Although the question "What is fear?" was open-ended, the teacher aimed to steer the dialogue toward examining discourses of racism and racialization.

In one discussion, a brown female student shared her experience of feeling unsafe walking at night, saying: "If that's because I am Muslim or a woman, I don't know." Her comment reflected the intersection of gender and religious discrimination. When the student shared her experiences, another Muslim female student sitting in the outer circle visibly got eager to participate in the discussion, leaning forward, starting to sit uneasily on the chair, and seeking eye contact with the teacher as searching for approval to speak. Finding her eagerness funny, some

students in the outer circles – the student included – either smiled or made small giggles. Interactions we interpret as ways of showing acknowledgement of the student in the outer circle's shared experience with the student in the inner circle. The structure of the dialogue circle, with inner and outer circles and alternating, can be said to encourage students to participate in different ways, where listening is equally important to speaking, and while the student in the inner circle might not notice how the student in the outer circle reacts to what is being discussed, students in the outer circle do. Verbally or non-verbally, the Fishbowl approach to dialogue circles can give rise to different forms of participation.

In a separate circle, another brown Muslim female student shared experiences of racism, highlighting the shared vulnerability of marginalised students. For the three brown female students (two in the inner circle and one in the outer circle) to share their own fears of how their bodies are being perceived as fearful is supported by empirical findings from Iram Khawaja's work on young Muslims' lived experiences in Denmark. Khawaja (2010; 2011) demonstrates how being positioned as a young Muslim in a Danish context is shaped through intersections of gender, religion, ethnicity, and race, and how these intersections influence both social belonging and everyday navigation. Her research shows that young Muslims often become acutely aware of the 'gazes' directed at them in different social settings – gazes that mark them as other, and that shape how they understand their own bodies, safety, and positionality. These dynamics resonate strongly with the students' reflections in our material, where their uncertainty about whether they are perceived as threatening, vulnerable, or out of place mirrors the racialised and religiously inflected othering processes Khawaja identifies. In this sense, the students' testimonies echo broader patterns of racialisation and minoritisation that structure how Muslim subjects come to experience themselves within Danish educational and social spaces. Moreover, this demonstrates how the progression of the dialogue circles can encourage student perspectives that are usually less represented in traditional teaching formats, in this case, of experiences with racialisation and racism, a room for collective learning and reflection.

For example, in the meta reflection following the dialogue after the dialogue circle addressing "what is fear?", a white male student shared how the discussion about fear, gaze, and physical appearance made him reflect on how he and his friends refrained from walking specific areas at night during weekends in Copenhagen. Like the brown Muslim female students, he shared how he was aware of the gazes when going out at night; for example, how he enjoyed dressing in "traditional feminine appearing" clothes but refrained from doing so due to fear of being a target for homophobia and anti-gay violence. This demonstrates the potential of dialogue circles to enable vulnerability and recognition, and where students can reflect and theorize together across difference.

While the dialogue circles created conditions for vulnerability and mutual recognition, they also made visible the uneven distribution of comfort, authority, and legitimacy within the classroom. The very moments that enabled marginalised students to articulate lived experiences of racialisation simultaneously generated discomfort and ethical uncertainty among other participants. These tensions point to the necessity of examining how power dynamics, responsibility, and pedagogical authority are navigated within dialogue circles.

#### *Navigating power, discomfort, and pedagogical responsibility*

While dialogue circles are intended to decentre the traditional teacher role, our material shows that the teacher remained an important point of orientation, particularly during the meta-reflection segments. Here, the teacher posed questions such as: "Was it a good dialogue?"; "Did everyone who wanted to say something get to speak?"; and "Did those who did not speak much still get something out of participating?" [translated from Danish]. These questions invited collective reflection on both the content and the form of the dialogue, while also making visible how difficult it was to fully step away from established classroom roles. During the dialogue circles, some

students occasionally sought the teacher's approval through eye contact or body orientation, but this reliance became especially pronounced during the meta-reflections, where responsibility for guiding the discussion was more clearly recentralised.

These tensions were further accentuated as students engaged critically with racialisation and racism. Between two dialogue circles, a white male student approached the teacher to express concern about the emotional vulnerability of the two brown Muslim female students who had shared experiences of racism. Together with a white female student, he questioned whether addressing racism in this format was ethically responsible and suggested additional debriefing, drawing on their psycho-therapeutic background. While framed as care for fellow students, this reaction must be understood in a broader context in which racism and racialisation are rarely acknowledged as structural issues in Denmark and the other Scandinavian countries. As previous research shows, discussions of racism in such contexts often evoke strong discomfort, particularly among white individuals without lived experience of racialised marginalisation (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; DiAngelo, 2018; Yang, 2021; Khawaja, 2022).

From this perspective, the students' concern can be read less as an indication of the brown students' vulnerability and more as an expression of white discomfort when dominant positions are challenged. As DiAngelo (2018) argues, such reactions may take the form of white fragility, where discomfort is managed by shifting attention away from structural critique. In this interaction, the concern expressed by the white students appeared less about protecting marginalized participants and more about mitigating their own unease, thereby recentralising their emotional experience (Khawaja, 2022). At the same time, these moments can be understood as potential sites of learning, as discomfort itself became visible and contestable within the pedagogical space.

The teacher navigated this situation by explicitly reframing discomfort as an integral part of the learning process. Drawing on the assigned literature, the teacher emphasised that critically engaging with systemic issues such as racism often generates discomfort, and that such affective responses can be productive when approached through reflection on theoretical readings and lived experiences. Making these affective dimensions explicit can underpin how discomfort can foster critical engagement and learning through compassion. This reframing was echoed during a following meta-reflection, when a white female student, who had participated primarily in the outer circle and described her role as more "passive" or listening, reflected:

"I can never go back after this session, like, I have never been so aware of my own position and privileges, as I am now after listening to all the discussions today – it has not been easy, however, a super eye-opening experience for me" [translated from Danish].

Moreover, this reflection illustrates how dialogue circles can support different forms of participation that contribute to collective learning without requiring all students to speak in the same way or to the same extent. At the same time, it underscores the complexity of facilitating dialogical spaces that invite personal perspectives on sensitive topics. What this situated intervention highlights is the importance of consistently framing the classroom as a learning environment rather than a therapeutic space, by encouraging students to engage their experiences through theory and by clarifying the pedagogical purpose of the dialogue circles.

Rather than indicating a failure to decentre authority, these moments point to a key pedagogical tension: facilitating dialogue does not entail the absence of leadership, but a reconfiguration of how authority and responsibility are enacted. The meta-reflection segments can function as spaces for collective sense-making, where students reflected on how knowledge was produced, whose voices were amplified, and how power circulated within the dialogue. This became particularly evident during the final meta-reflection, when a white female student expressed hesitation about sharing her viewpoints, noting that certain positions appeared to

carry more legitimacy than others – a concern echoed by a brown male student. Rather than resolving these tensions, the dialogue circles rendered them visible. In this sense, such moments can be understood as indicators of learning, as students became increasingly aware of how theoretical frameworks, lived experiences, and positionality shape perceptions of legitimacy.

According to Sørensen and Risbjerg (2018), the facilitator's role involves guiding discussion and supporting students in integrating lived experiences with assigned literature. By centring lived experience as a form of knowledge production, dialogue circles challenge dominant epistemological hierarchies and have the potential to offer students a format in which they can grapple with epistemic uncertainty and ambiguity.

By attending to power imbalances, encouraging quieter forms of participation, and consistently reframing privilege as structural rather than individual, dialogue circles can support students in engaging with disagreement, vulnerability, and complexity. In this way, the approach not only destabilised familiar classroom hierarchies but also enabled students to practise dialogical engagement central to higher education and to critically interrogating racism and privilege in predominantly white educational spaces.

### Conclusion

The findings from this intervention emphasise several values of dialogue circles in fostering critical engagement and compassion with racism and privilege in predominantly white higher education spaces. By prioritising collaborative knowledge production, dialogue circles can create an inclusive environment where students can explore sensitive topics through both personal and collective reflection. The structured approach, including the inner and outer circle format, provided equitable opportunities for participation and enabled students to critically engage with the assigned literature and lived experiences. This experience has highlighted the potential for dialogue circles to destabilise traditional hierarchies in the classroom, though it also revealed challenges, such as navigating power dynamics and addressing student discomfort. However, this experience also shows the challenges for the teacher to stay as the facilitator (asking evaluating questions) and to create a room where other readings of the texts and the discussion is welcome without creating discomfort for the facilitator.

Looking forward, this intervention offers perspectives for many teachers' pedagogical development. Expanding the dialogue circle method to other complex topics could further enrich student engagement. Additionally, integrating structured feedback mechanisms, such as post-session reflections, could provide deeper insights into the use of the method. By employing thoughtful and intentional teaching strategies, this intervention gives us hope for addressing sensitive topics in teaching practice. We see significant potential in fostering spaces where students feel heard and equally valued in the process of collective knowledge production.

### References

- Absalon (2019). Inspirationskatalog. Demokratiske fællesskaber. Forebyggelse af polarisering og eksklusion i skolen. [Inspiration catalog. Democratic communities. Prevention of polarization and exclusion in school]. Udgivet af Nationalt Center for Forebyggelse af Ekstremisme. <https://stopekstremisme.dk/ekstremisme/videnspublikationer/demokratiske-faellesskaber-forebyggelse-af-polarisering-og-eksklusion-i-skolen>
- Ahmed, S. (2013) Introduction: Feel Your Way. I Ahmed, S. The Cultural Politics of Emotion, 1-16. Routledge. Link: <http://pratiquesdhospitalite.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/245435211-sara-ahmed-the-cultural-politics-of-emotion.pdf>
- Alexander, R. (2017). *Towards dialogic teaching. Rethinking classroom talk*. Cambridge, MA: Dialogos.
- Andreassen, R. & Myong, L. (2017). Race, Gender, and Researcher Positionality Analysed through

- Memory Work. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 7(2), 97-104. <https://doi.org/10.1515/njmr-2017-0011>.
- Bakhtin, M. (1986). The problem of speech genres. In C. Emerson, & M. Holquist (eds.), *Speech genres and other late essays* (60–102). Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press.
  - Bakhtin, M.M. (1984). *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics*. Edited and translated by C. Emerson, Minneapolis, MN: University and Minnesota Press.
  - Bonilla-Silva, E. (2010). *Racism without racists: Color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in the United States* (3rd ed.). Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
  - Brygger, R (2021) rapporter fra Videncenter for integration publiceret på DRC Dansk Flygtningehjælps hjemmeside: <https://integration.drc.ngo/bliv-klogere/videnscenterforintegration-dk/efterkommere-er-overrepraesenteret-pa-flere-videregaende-uddannelser/>
  - Cook, A. & Tashlik, P. (2004). *Talk: Discussion-based Classrooms*. Teachers College Press.
  - Danbolt, M., & Myong, L. (2019). Racial Turns and Returns: Recalibrations of Racial Exceptionalism in Danish Public Debates on Racism. In P. Hervik (Ed.), *Racialization, Racism, and Anti-Racism in the Nordic Countries* (pp. 39–61). Springer International Publishing. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-74630-2\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-74630-2_2)
  - Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education. An introduction to the philosophy of education*. New York, NY: The Macmillan Company.
  - DiAngelo, R. (2018). *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*
  - Habel, Y. (2011). Challenging Swedish Exceptionalism? Teaching while Black. In K. Freeman & E. Johnson (Eds.), *Education in the Black Diaspora* (pp. 99–122). Routledge.
  - Hansen, M. N., Jensen, U. H., & Sarp, R. S. (2019). På sporet af dialogisk undervisning: historiske, teoretiske og empiriske perspektiver. *Kognition & Paedagogik*, 114, 6-16. Artikel 1.
  - hHooks, B. (1994) *Theory as Liberatory Practice*, *Yale Journal of Law & Feminism*: Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 2.
  - Jensen, U. H. (2019). Den meningsfulde undervisning: sociologiske refleksioner over praksis med dialogbaseret undervisning. *Kognition & Paedagogik*, (114), 46-54.
  - Khawaja, I. (2022) *Memory Work as Engaged Critical Pedagogy. Creating Collaborative Spaces for Reflections on Racialisation, Privilege and Whiteness*. In *Nordic Journal of Social Research*, Vol. 13:1-2022, s. 94-107.
  - KGU (2016). Københavns Kommunes Ungdomsskole, heltidsundervisning og 10. klasse: Materiale til bestyrelsesmøde [https://ungdomsskolen.kk.dk/sites/ungdomsskolen.kk.dk/files/uploaded-files/samlet\\_materiale\\_til\\_bestyrelsesmoede\\_14.\\_december\\_2016.pdf](https://ungdomsskolen.kk.dk/sites/ungdomsskolen.kk.dk/files/uploaded-files/samlet_materiale_til_bestyrelsesmoede_14._december_2016.pdf)
  - Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
  - Learning for Justice (2024). Fishbowl. <https://www.learningforjustice.org/classroom-resources/teaching-strategies/community-inquiry/fishbowl>
  - Linell, P. (1998). *Approaching dialogue. Talk, interaction and contexts in dialogue perspectives*. Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
  - Mercer, N. & Littleton, K. (2007). *Dialogue and the development of children's thinking: A sociocultural approach*. London: Routledge.
  - Nystrand, M., Gamoran, A., Kachur, R., & Prendergast, C. (1997). *Opening dialogue: Understanding the dynamics of language and learning in the English classroom*. London: Teachers College Press.
  - Reznitskaya, A., Kuo, L.J, Clark, A.M., Miller, B., Jadallah, M., Anderson, R.C., & Nguyen-Jahiel, K. (2009, March). Collaborative reasoning: A dialogic approach to group discussions. *Cambridge Journal of Education* 39(1), 29–48.
  - Säljö, R. (2000). *Lärande i praktiken. Et sociokulturelt perspektiv*. [Learning in practice. A sociocultural

- perspective]. Stockholm: Prisma.
- Skadegård, M. C., & Horst, C. (2021). Between a rock and a hard place: A study of everyday racism, racial discrimination, and racial microaggressions in contemporary Denmark. *Social Identities*, 27(1),92–113. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2020.1815526>
  - Skadegård, M. C., & Jensen, I. (2018). 'There is Nothing Wrong with Being a Mulatto': Structural Discrimination and Racialised Belonging in Denmark. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 39(4), 451–465. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2018.1484346>
  - Smedegaard Nielsen, A. (2021). Saving racialized children through good schooling: Media discourses on racialized children's schooling as a site for upholding Danish whiteness. *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy*, 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20020317.2021.1980275>
  - Sørensen, M. B & Risbjerg, M. (2018). Dialogbaseret undervisning. Om bæredygtige læringsfællesskaber I individets tidsalder. Forlaget Columbus.
  - Sørensen, M.B., Risbjerg, M., & Halling, I.F. (2019). *Fællesskabende dialoger*. [Community-creating dialogues]. Copenhagen: Forlaget Columbus.
  - Thomas, V. G. (2009). Critical Race Theory: Ethics and Dimensions of Diversity in Research. In D. M. Mertens & P. E. Ginsberg (Eds.), *The handbook of social research ethics* (pp. 1–19). Sage Publications.
  - Volosinov, V.N. (1973). *Marxism and the philosophy of language*. London: Seminar Press.
  - Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society. The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
  - Vygotsky, L.S. (1968). *Thought and language* (newly revised, translated, and edited by Alex Kozulin). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
  - Wekker, G. (2016). *White innocence: Paradoxes of colonialism and race*. Duke University Press.
  - Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice. Learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
  - Yang, A. (2021). *Child-Friendly Racism? An ethnographical study on children's racialized becoming in a race-blind context*. Aalborg Universitetsforlag.
  - Yang, A. (November 1, 2024). Følelser, læring og levede erfaringer [Keynote Slides], Department of Culture and Learning, Aalborg University.
  - Zeichner, K. (2001). Educational Action Research. In P. Reason, H. Bradbury (eds.), *Handbook of Action Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

### Betingelser for brug af denne artikel

Denne artikel er omfattet af ophavsretsloven, og der må citeres fra den.

Følgende betingelser skal dog være opfyldt:

- Citatet skal være i overensstemmelse med „god skik“
- Der må kun citeres „i det omfang, som betinges af formålet“
- Ophavsmanden til teksten skal krediteres, og kilden skal angives ift. ovenstående bibliografiske oplysninger

### © Copyright

DUT og artiklens forfatter

### Udgivet af

[Dansk Universitetspædagogisk Netværk](#)