



ANTI-RACISM BOOK CLUB

2020/2021 Book Club experience



Introduction

Anti-racist book clubs hold great allure, and potentially great power, at a moment when many, people, are becoming conscious of their own educational blind spots around Black history and racial justice.

Book clubs are a cross between education and relaxation, radicalisation, and affirmation; there's a vibrant history of reading groups expanding people's political consciousness and moving them to action, but also a deeply entrenched tradition of book clubs for some groups as social spaces.

This tension likely makes them an appealing starting point for people who want to dip their toes into the struggle for perhaps the first time, in a setting that they're familiar with. The real test is what comes next, once the book club attendees have got their feet wet with some radical reading.

I established the Anti- Racism Leadership Book Club in October 2020.

Each session was a facilitated discussion made up of set questions, opportunities to share learning and a requirement to share actions the leader had taken within their daily practice to be more anti-racist.

I was pleased to have a diverse range of leaders from various sectors education, football, the arts, community/voluntary sectors, LA, University and even a leader from the US. We also had London, York and Leicester based members.

The group is intended to be a forum for **discussion** of ideas and for learning about differing viewpoints, not for **debate**. As leaders, we are used to trying to convince everyone that we are right. In discussions around equality, diversity, and inclusion, it's important to understand that everyone sees and experiences the world differently - what seems "right" in your experience may not be so in someone else's.

Everyone is asked to consider different perspectives, for the purpose of sensitivity, learning, and growth.

For me the year of meeting 6 weekly and selecting and reading books that focused us on race equality issue assisted us to work towards a set of principles. I was pleased that these principles came together without having to lay down any formal ground rules. Leaders were open, respectful committed and willing to listen, learn and to share.

We conducted ourselves over the 12-month period abiding by these unspoken ways of being:

- **Recognise:** We recognised that we must strive to overcome the historical and divisive biases, of racism, in our society and workplaces.
- **Acknowledge:** We acknowledged that we are all systematically taught misinformation about our own group(s) and about members of other groups. This is true for everyone, regardless of our group(s).
- **No Blame:** We agreed not to blame ourselves or others for the misinformation we have learned, but to accept responsibility for not repeating misinformation after we have learned otherwise.
- **Trust:** Everyone came to the table to learn, grow, and share. We acknowledged that we may be at different stages of learning on the content and discussion topics. We trusted each other to do the best they can. We all make mistakes and have bad days; but when these occur, we challenge and encourage each other to do better.
- **Respect:** We agreed to treat other book club members' reflections and questions with respect. We acknowledged that we may be at different stages of learning on the topic of anti-racism. However, this did not mean that we should ignore problematic statements.
- **Individual Experience:** We agreed that no one should be required or expected to speak for their whole race or gender. We acknowledged that we couldn't, even if we wanted to.
- **Share the Space:** Share responsibility for including all voices in the discussion. No one dominated the discussions; members even took a step back and invited others to speak. No one sat on the fence, everyone spoke up, and shared their learning, actions, and experiences.
- **Not Experts:** Although it was me that led the group, I made it clear that I too was a learner and not an "experts." I was there to help facilitate the process. Everyone in the group were attending to listen, share and to learn. We also recognised that everyone has an opinion, but nevertheless, opinions, are not the same as informed knowledge backed up by research. Depending on the topic and context, both are valid to share but it's important to know the difference. We engaged in deep learning, we were all committed and wanted to learn more and gain practice reflecting and speaking thoughtfully on difficult topics of racism.
- **Ask for help:** We made it clear that it is okay not to know, to keep in mind that we are all still learning and are bound to make mistakes when approaching a complex task or exploring new ideas. All members were open to changing their minds and making space for others to do so as well.

There was a lot I liked about the Book Club but I want to share a list of the things that stand out for me most

- The commitment of the leaders to turn up week after week
- The commitment to getting involved in the debate, sharing their journey and their learning/action points
- They listened, read the books with uttermost commitment, and learned
- Nothing I asked was too much, they always delivered like good leaders
- There were no excuses for not having read the book or doing the work
- Members bought the books, the kindle downloads without issue of cost
- To make change, leaders left behind the warm uteri of their reading circles and put their knowledge into bold, concrete action.
- I enjoyed the open space dialogue, the empathy shown as opposed to analysis
- No one minimised experience/s
- I enjoyed the podcasts of the discussions

I am so proud of the leaders coming together, this is the first step that we can take to ensure that we are advocating for ethnically diverse staff and customers of our organisations. But being anti-racist doesn't stop with reading a book or having a conversation."

I think the most important thing to take away is that allyship is key to our progress. Racism is a real-world lived experience, so anti-racism has to be something that we all implement into our daily lives.

Now, me and my team at EDUK are mulling over our next actions to build upon the book club's momentum.

We are going to celebrate on October 12 and hopefully after reading what all members have to say you will join us for another year of anti-racism leaders working together to eradicate racism from our policies, processes, practices and people.

Alyson Malach

I joined the book club to deepen and broaden my understanding of contemporary thought and writing on racism. My research and policy and campaigning work has addressed racial and ethnic inequalities in health and social factors in the USA and UK over several decades, so I'm very familiar with statistics on inequality, and relevant theoretical approaches like critical race theory, but I felt I was less

familiar with the contemporary literature coming from activists, novelists, anti-racist practitioners etc. And I wanted to join a forum where these issues could be guided and discussed with a wide range of people.

What have started to do

I feel the reading we have done, and the discussions we have had, have helped me to have the confidence to ask challenging questions in institutional settings, and to urge pro-active anti-racist policies and practice.

What you have stopped doing

I have stopped feeling that it is enough to know the facts of the issue, and important to know the feelings, emotions, thinking, responses of those with lived experience.

What you will continue to do

Even though my schedule means I am moving on from the book club, I will continue to use what I have learned, and also take this learning into my work on other social justice issues.

What you have changed

I would like to think I have started to overcome my fear of dissension and being seen as confrontational and therefore being more willing to speak up and challenge.

All best wishes

Kate

I haven't belonged to a book club before and the first thing that surprised me was that the members were so different and widely spread. I had presumed that the members would mainly be from Greater Manchester, as they would be if we were meeting physically. But of course, the internet changes all that. So, I have met some remarkable people with an extraordinary range of experiences, both personal and professional.

What you have started to do

I have started to read books, which might sound a bit mundane, but I am not a great reader. I buy a lot of books, but I rarely finish them. The need to be able to discuss the books at the club has meant that I have been finishing books! And the books (and the discussions about them) have proved useful in leading to further research and in providing examples and approaches to a wide range of situations from the framing of projects to discussions and correspondence with colleagues and to political engagement.

What you have stopped doing

Well, I hope I have stopped avoiding difficult conversations. I'm not sure I avoid difficult conversations, but I maybe didn't have the material or the confidence with which to intervene. I don't like to get into an argument if I'm not sure of my ground.

What you will continue to do

I will continue to explore the issues and confront my own history and the history of racism and colonialism in general. This is not just about books - it's about culture in general - music, film, the visual arts, spoken word. For those of us in the arts the culture wars are heating up and we need to win a whole raft of arguments, from statues - to the repatriation of objects seized during Britain's imperial adventures - to place names - to representation. This has already been a long struggle.

What you have changed

In professional terms I have begun to identify, and partner with, organisations who are promoting change and seeking to bring about a fairer representation of artists from diverse communities across all art forms and indeed workers at all levels and in all areas of the sector, but in particular at more senior levels. Routes of progression need to be established. We also need to create more opportunities at entry level for artists from minority communities and from working class communities - all the areas in which the sector is underrepresented. But having created opportunities for 'emerging artists' there then have to be routes along which they can move and progress. Some artists have been emerging for thirty years.

Rick

I have found the book club very informative and motivating. It has introduced me to some amazing authors who I wasn't aware of who have covered in depth experiences of racism which resonate with me due to my own experiences.

What you have started to do

I have started to listen and to engage with a diverse range of people face to face and via virtual platforms. Listening to Allies on the Anti-Racist Book Club has been informative and I have acknowledged that even though I do a number of anti-racist activities there is more I can do to effect change.

What you have stopped doing

I think it is important to say that I experienced ill health early on after joining the book club and it would have been easy to stop going and make excuses for my absence. I have stopped putting off what I can do today. I stopped reading the books but listened to the feedback from other members and contributed. I have stopped letting disabilities effect my abilities. I have the skills, experience, and power to help eradicate racism and I am using it to the best of my ability. My message is stop procrastinating and take action regardless of your situation. We can all effect change on our own or together. I have stopped working on this agenda by myself and will continue to work on it as a collective learning from others and sharing my lived experiences. Let's all stop making excuses for not getting involved

What you will continue to do

I am already doing a lot to bring about change but managing change is important. I also believe that to effect change we have to tell our story and move on. I have started telling my story in more creative ways though storytelling and poetry more so than before. Poems are specific to the changes needed. I will continue to do what I have done for many years to learn and to teach. I have been impressed by how the facilitator moved Black History month to a year of activity around Black Lives and experiences though this Anti Racism Leadership Book club. I will continue to go into schools to deliver activities on Black History Month, storytelling workshops with elders, writing about my experiences of being a product of two cultures - Jamaican (where I was born) and British (where I've lived since age nine), presenting an African Caribbean news programme on local radio stations. To name a few. I will continue my work in the community but will also set up a community anti-racism book club for schools, care homes and youth groups to build back better together.

What you have changed

I have changed my narrative; I speak about positivity and creativity within black communities and not just the struggles and inequalities faced by ethnically diverse individuals and groups. It is important to evidence the contributions of these individuals and communities across all sectors (NHS, Education, Social Care etc) Being in the book club has reassured me that I am on the right path and given me confidence and motivation to continue to do what I can to bring about true race equality by opening people's eyes to truth about different races.

Deanne

When I became part of the book group, I knew that I had white privilege and needed to learn more about the implicit things I was doing to contribute to racism, largely from listening to the Black Lives Matter movement. But I was definitely complacent, and I started a lot of books about race and never finished them.

Seeing the commitment of others in the book group inspired me to make my own commitment to learning and reflecting on my own role in maintaining a racist society.

Being part of the group motivates me to make sure I read, absorb, and reflect.

I've learnt a lot from the amazing books which have really ranged from facts and statistics to first hand experiences.

What you have started to do

Challenge people I know on their language and offhand comments.

What you have stopped doing

Waiting for other people to inform me about racism.

What you will continue to do

Read and learn.

What you have changed

I think coming from an academic background I was quite used to reading statistics and reflecting on how awful racism is.

I think this allowed me to distance myself from it. However, I think it was the personal experiences that gave me a new understanding.

I particularly connected to 'I Belong Here' where the woman experiences many microaggressions along her journey.

It helped me see the insidiousness of racism and how I need to be alert to my role in that.

Jo