

Case Study #1

He-Liu (they/them)

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How to start the 'Feedback' Case Study

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He-Liu, sibling to two younger sisters, grew up in the outer suburbs of New York. When they completed their undergraduate - with a first-class degree - in Education Studies in New York, they were desperate for a change of scenery, so they applied to the University of York! In their first term, He-Liu received formative feedback that troubled them. Their lecturer, Charlotte Stern said:

"This is an interesting essay with quite a lot of potential. You are passionate about your topic. Well done on drawing from a wide variety of sources. Your use of English is, in several ways, very good. In terms of organisation, state your academic argument earlier and support it with evidence and logic. The department handbook for additional organizational information..."

He-Liu hadn't received feedback like this before and wondered if it was just the 'way of doing things' in the UK. Their best friend on their programme, Alex - whose Cumbrian accent they love - shares the feedback they got with He-Liu, in an effort to lift their spirits.

"I am impressed with the confidence and clarity of your writing. I think you will be able to produce a really good essay. You have read widely and you have a strong academic voice. Regarding the body of your essay, make sure your argument is clear in the introduction and that it continues throughout your essay..."

He-Liu notices a stark difference but fears others on the programme, and their lecturer, may not be as aware. He-Liu doesn't let this ruin the last week of the first term so tries to loosen up by going to the department social. At the social, they're told about DEC by other international students in the department. Nervously, He-Liu attends DEC bi-monthly meetings and feels comforted, and angered that many other students share their concerns.

How to use the Reflective Questions

As you explore these case studies, we expect various reactions and questions will arise. Nurture your thoughts and allow for an emotive response - these stories are worthy of such. The questions you have may empower discourse, or personal reflection. Either way, we hope your brain is tingled! If you need a little spark of inspiration to get you thinking, here are some reflective questions. Utilise them liberally, letting your own experiences and ideals navigate your approach. We'd love to hear your thoughts - why not add them to our forum discussion?

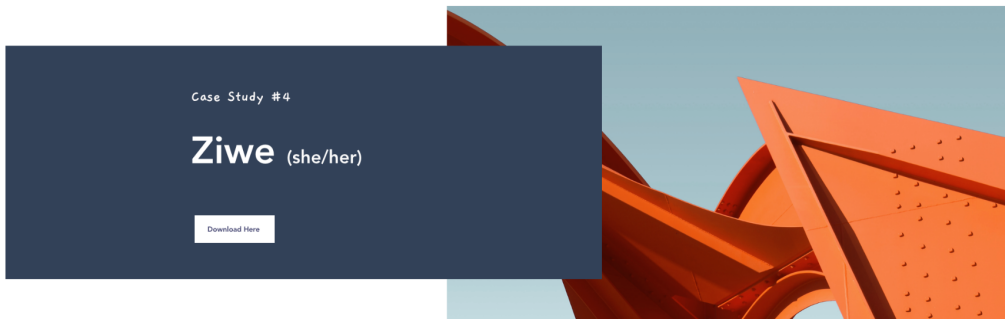
Reflective Questions

1. How were He-Liu and Alexi's feedback comments similar and different?

2. Why do you think He-Liu was taken aback?

3. How was He-Liu's feedback comment implicitly biased when compared to Alexi's?

4. What can the instructor do to make sure their feedback comments are not implicitly biased?



How to start the 'Discussion' Case Study

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Ziwe is in her social psychology online seminar. The class is discussing various societal aspects that impact access to education where gender often dominates the discussion. A few of Ziwe's coursemates divert the conversation to one about how class acts as a barrier to tertiary education but this conversation does not go as far. The lecturer, Sarah Trot, then asks the group to think about how race could impact access to education. Ziwe notices that all mics that were unmuted, are now muted, and everyone looks away from their cameras.

Ziwe has already done her fair share of contributing and she does not like feeling that she has to contribute to discussions about race purely because she is the only black girl in her seminar. Usually, she waits a few awkward moments and the lecturer changes the topic. However, today she decided to share her thoughts.

"When I was in secondary school I always thought subconsciously that being a writer was something I just couldn't do. All of my English teachers were white, every book we ever read was written by white people and every character was always white. At the time I didn't even realize, and it wasn't until I got to Sixth Form and read one of my first books by a black author that I realised books could represent me and that I could be an author after all. There are so many subjects that I've never even dreamed of doing because I just assumed it wasn't available to me because I never saw any black role models."

Her hands are shaking. She turns her camera off to have a deep breath and a drink of water. This is the first time she has shared something personal and knows it may make others uncomfortable. Even though it was scary, Ziwe is proud that she was honest about her experiences and feels empowered. Until...

"Well, I think now's a good time to send you into breakout rooms for your first task."

Ziwe instantly regrets sharing and feels completely dismissed by her seminar group. She is already a member of DEC so brings this up in the next meeting where she is affirmed in her experience and given the opportunity to express how she feels about the way Sarah Trot made her feel.

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Reflective Questions

1. What would have been a better way to encourage students to discuss race?
2. How can you make sure that discussions of race don't fall onto the shoulders of your few BAME students?
3. What would have been the appropriate way to react to the student's story?
4. How can we encourage comfortable and open discussions when experiencing online learning?
5. Why can discussions about race be uncomfortable for students of all races?
6. What could the lecturer have done to manage some of the uncomfortable feelings - while also enabling additional discussion of this issue?

Case Study #2

Promise (she/her)

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How to start the 'Teaching' Case Study

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Promise, the only African student in her course, usually had high engagement with her module options, participating in class, as well as completing the independent tasks. In one class, led by a senior member of the department, the tutor asked the class how many years of formal education a pupil should receive. The class was encouraged to discuss with their peers and then feedback to the tutor.

Many responses were given. One student's response to the question was '12 years'. The tutor replied, '12 years of compulsory education, 12 years a Slave.'

Much to Promise's outrage, she gasped. She couldn't understand why a senior tutor in the department would make a comment like that. The rest of the class didn't say much in response which made Promise feel invisible. In the immediate hours following the lecture, Promise was replaying the incident in her mind. She felt voiceless and unsure of where to go to raise her concern.

Was it even wrong of him, since he said it without remorse? Who would care? Could this be turned on her for being dramatic?

Promise internalised this event and to this day has never spoken to a member of staff about it.

How to use the Reflective Questions

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Reflective Questions

1. What is wrong here?
2. What needs to be addressed?
3. What support is needed for Promise?
4. What kind of support and/or training is needed for the staff?
5. What kind of support and/or training is needed for students in the dominant group in the class?

Case Study #3

Cheslin (he/him)

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How to start the 'Context' Case Study

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Cheslin's favourite module is his World History module. This

term, the module is split into two different case studies, each spanning 5 weeks. The first case study is World War II and a lecture in week one begins with the lecturer issuing a content warning to the class.

He says "anyone who feels uncomfortable with the content at any point over the next five weeks is free to step out. Someone will come check on you and can catch you up at a later stage if need be."

Due to the sensitive start to the case study, Cheslin notices that class discussions are sensitive and inclusive.

Week 6 means the start of the second case study: Myanmar. The focus of the study is conflict and political unrest, so Cheslin assumes it may be distressing at times again. To his surprise, however, the lecturer issues no content warning to the class. In turn, discussions around this case study are uninformed and less sensitive. They learn of how many had to flee and Cheslin relates as his family arrived in the UK as refugees. As the weeks progress, Cheslin grows more distressed as conversations and content are not handled with the same sensitivity and respect that those around World War II were.

Cheslin walks back to college and past Central Hall where he sees a Social Sciences World Cafe taking place. Out of interest, he pops in. He is struck by DEC's stand, where they discuss the need to diversify the curriculum but not only in terms of content but in terms of pedagogy too.

After what Cheslin has experienced in his World History module, this rings especially true as it is not necessarily what was being taught that is the issue but rather how it was approached in the classroom.

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Reflective Questions

1. What are the things the student may have been feeling, and how can the lecturer be aware of it?

2. Is it possible to account for every potential connection a student may have to an academic discussion?

3. What steps could the lecturer have taken to ensure the student did not feel alone in their reaction to the topic?

4. What potential content in your class may affect students of diverse backgrounds?

Case Study #5

Jade (she/her)

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How to start the 'Content' Case Study

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Jade is a first-year student from London with a keen interest in science education. As part of her course, Jade is learning about arguments for and against using DNA data in education. Due to her interest in science education, Jade finds herself interested in this discussion and does some further reading and research. She learns about its history and how it has been used to further white supremacy and how it can be incredibly political. As a black student, this makes her dubious of any arguments for its use in education and she can't understand why this side of genetics was not discussed in the lecture.

In a discussion board, she evaluates the arguments for DNA data in education, by criticising its history and how it has been used in the past to push racist agendas and further white supremacy, using historical evidence and the controversy and criticism around it. She notices the next day that her lecturer has responded and checks the feedback she has received.

"Inflammatory language"
"Too political"
"Overly critical"

Jade is left feeling shocked and confused. Was she wrong to have brought up race? Was she overly critical and too political? She didn't realise that her argument would be a problem and feels stupid for bringing up race in relation to this topic. She decides not to contribute to the group discussion when discussed in her online seminar and keeps her camera off.

Due to Jade's proactive nature, she decides to draw up a proposal to begin a DEC discussion group in her department so that no other students are made to feel the way she did.

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Reflective Questions

1. Why might DNA data be a sensitive topic for BAME students?
2. How could race issues have been included in the preparatory materials?
3. What would have been a more appropriate way to give feedback on Jade's work?

Case Study #6

Ella (she/her)

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How to start the 'Expectations' Case Study

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Ella is a first-year undergraduate student of black British African descent. Both her immediate and extended family are well educated and have senior professional roles in their workplaces. Ella has grown up to believe that her intrinsic worth academically is based on merit, i.e. how hard she works and the level of work she produces.

Her family's motto has always been: 'If you aim for the sky, you may reach the treetops. But if you aim for the treetops, you may never get off the ground.'

Recently Ella has realised that the majority of references to the black race in the education department, tend to be negative.

She is taken aback by the many facts presented, suggesting that the black race may be "less intelligent" or more likely to attain "lower grades" academically.

Coupled with little or no celebrated persons of her race and background, and a lack of knowledge of their intellectual work and contributions to the world at large, not having these precedents to encourage her to become her best self, has tainted her "can-do" attitude and she is concerned that she may not be able to achieve the personal and professional goals she originally set out to achieve.

Ella feels that the media's negative portrayal of Black British citizens is influencing these stereotypes. Ella is battling with whether this will be a self-fulfilling prophecy for her, if from a young age this ethnic minority group is being associated with negative outcomes by their educators. This has led Ella to believe that she may be judged inaccurately by her lecturers and her peers, as she's hearing and believing more and more, that people from her background are sadly perceived as a social problem.

Although Ella is intelligent, generally enjoys her course, and is excelling in it, she has now started to feel uncomfortable when she attends classes and has become paranoid about others' perceptions of her. This has now had a detrimental, adverse and negative impact on her mental health.

So, she decides to speak to her supervisor about it who suggests that she joins DEC. At DEC, Ella is exposed to research, literature and academia that she has never experienced in the classroom. She feels she is given the necessary social and academic tools to fight against the barriers the education system holds against her.

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Reflective Questions

1. How is this situation likely to make Ella feel - and what may happen as a result?
2. What can and should staff do to try to make themselves aware of students like Ella in order to try to prevent situations like Ella's from occurring?
3. Will Ella be likely to achieve optimum grades in this environment?
4. How should materials on existing inequalities in education be presented?
5. What could the tutor do to help improve Ella's university experience?