# Design your Neighbour

## A teacher training best practice from University College of Østfold, Norway

### Introduction

In many aspects in life, we unconsciously and not always intended, divide peoples into an ‘us’ and ‘them’. As teachers we try to explain the differences in human behavior and attitudes by producing dichotomies or opposites, like boys and girls, just as we divide peoples into Christians or Muslims or Jews and gentiles, Hindi or Buddhist, like foreigners and fellow countrymen, immigrants and an ‘ethnic us’, just like black and white, teacher and student, school and parents etc.(Hylland Eriksen 2003). We do so because it is a matter of understanding our reality and making sense of our surroundings. However, inherent it creates also expectations of how the significant others are expecting to act and to be, and it is a presumption for producing stereotypes.

Racist knowledge comes early into children's social world. Socialization processes in childhood is an important element in establishing and developing racism. Høgmo (2005) argues that racism is formed by significant stereotypes that are allowed to form basic (knowledge) ‘axioms’. It's about the unchallenged statements about what exists in the world - and what should exist. We are brought up in the classification of ‘them’ from their ‘outside’, but it is their ‘inside’ that worries ‘us’. When we created categories ‘us’ and ‘them’ we have also laid the foundation for a production of myths that can not be falsified simply because we can not be present where ‘they –the others’ are. Therefore there is no limit to what kind of myths we can produce about ‘them’. These myths can not be contradicted because ‘we can not ignore the fact that they *are* like that’. When we produce a ‘them’ as a stereotype, we also create a complementary stereotype, namely an ‘us’. The racist idea is based on two fundamental axioms:

1. The ethnic paradox: the idea of ​​difference, and

2. The idea of ​​ranking humanity: Some are better than others - and I belong to the better. The formation of such stereotypes must be seen as the root of enmity between peoples, racism and oppression.

It is therefor important that teacher-trainers to challenge teacher students in their attitudes and create awareness of the importance of developing lessons that will include all students in the classrooms they are going to teach. An example of an including and challenging lesson we at the University College in Østfold teacher training have developed is a thinking skill called: Design your neighbour.

Design your neighbour is an activity in which students must expound on their own social values. They do this by indicating the requirements/conditions that a new neighbour must satisfy. They work according in a specific, self-explanatory manner using a diversity of geographical, sociological, moral and political concepts. In this activity, they discover to what extent stereotyping takes place and how stereotypes can be determined by their opinions and attitude in respect of others.

### Didactical background

The activities in ‘Design you neighbour’ teach students to

\* become aware of their own views and attitudes about coexisting with ‘others’;

\* argue and defend their own social values;

\* draw conclusions on the basis of data and one’s own opinions;

\* make a relationship between everyday issues (visible conduct) and abstract concepts and principles

in the area of ethics, sociology, political science, spatial planning, etc. (depending on the exercise);

\* establish a link between one’s own personal life (private domain) and society (public domain);

\* identify (label) and classify;

\* identify relationships and contexts;

\* imagine oneself as another person, in another country or in a different time (depending on the exercise).

### Experiences

This Thinking Skill is often considered as quite challenging for students. In fact, they will not find handling the task hard at all, since it is easy to both launch and manage this lesson. The difficult part is the debriefing and “bridging” part. Since many students hold stereotyped images about ’the significant other’ or how they envisage their ideal neighbour, it is often necessary to rectify the attitudes and opinions as and when they occur in the debriefing session. But this also provides an opportunity to develop critical thinking on the part of students, and help demystify cultural differences. Often, students show a great deal of interest in debating their own prejudices so that they can set their opinions against those of the other students and teachers. The teacher might use some time during the debriefing to develop reflective techniques in respect of the various levels of statements, so it is important for the teacher to have a clear idea of how to handle any xenophobia beforehand.

### Example - Design your Neighbour

#### Stereotypes

This lesson is designed to establish a debate and give a deeper understanding of how and what we can do to reduce the creation of stereotypes, for educational purposes.

#### Goals

The purpose is to design a next door «neighbour» (a “them”) that suits into the cultural and social habitat of the designers (students).

#### Tasks

Place the students in to groups of three. Give them the following task:

1: Choose five (5) statements/pieces of information (see below) and design a neighbour you would like to share your neighbourhood with. However you must not make a fantasy figure, make sure to keep it realistic at all times. All statements/pieces of information chosen must be discussed between the students, and the choices must be reasoned for and written down.

The students should discuss what statements they chose and why for 20 - 25 minutes.

2: Which of these statements/pieces of information are more important? Give the statements you picked out a number from one (1) to five (5) after its importance, where one (1) is most important and five (5) less important. You should use five (5) more minutes.

3: Which of these statements from the complete list (25) are less relevant and why? Pick out at least 5 statements that aren’t relevant. Write down your arguments in complete sentences.

4: Is there any statement you miss in the list above? Construct 1 – 5 statements you think would suite better for this design of your neighbour. Use 10 minutes for this task.

As a tutor you should walk around when the students work. You should listen to what kind of arguments are used, and use these in the debriefing part of the lesson.

#### Debriefing

*When you use task 1 and 2, you might start the debriefing.*

Questions you as a tutor might ask during the debriefing:

\* How did you solve this task in the group?

\* How did you solve your differences in the group?

\* What does your neighbour(s) look like?

\* Why did you choose the statements over others?

\* What are the most important statements for designing your neighbour?

\* What statements are not so much important, if any?

\* Did you identify the “us and them” statements in the group?

\* Does this lesson work well for creating good attitudes against racism?

*The questions that might be used when you as a tutor is debriefing the task No. 3:*

\* How did you solve this task in the group?

\* How did you solve your differences in the group?

\* Why did you choose the statements over others?

\* Did you identify what kind of statements the less important statements are?

*The questions that might be asked for task No. 4:*

\* Why did you choose these statements?

\* What do they tell about your attitude towards “strangers”?

Finally, generally for all tasks: Which statements promote tolerance and which don’t?

The statements:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| It is importantthat he/she iswell educated | It is importantthat he/she speaksthe samelanguage | It is not importantwhat religionshe/he has | It is not importantwhat languagehe/she speaks, aslong as we cancommunicate | It is importantthat she/he hasthe same religionas us |
| We should eat thesame type of food | He/she should begrateful to livewith us | He/she shouldwear the sametype of clothes asus | It does not matterwhat music he/shelikes | It is importantthat he/sheadjust her/his lifeto ours |
| The colour of theskin is not an issue | The colour of theskin must besame as ours | It is not important ifshe/he is well educated | He/she shouldkeep for themselves | He/she shouldmingle with us |
| He/she shouldkeep appointments | We should try tounderstandher/his culture | He/she mustunderstand our culture | It is not importantwhat clothesshe/he wares | He/she shouldfollow our socialand cultural rules |
| She/he must notbe fat | Her/his appearanceis of no importance | She/he should notbe allowed tomarry one of us | She/he should bestrict in her/hisupbringing of theirchildren | It is of no importanceif she/hehits their children |