

# Reflections of a migrant academic on a Development Education skill-sharing session

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18<sup>th</sup> June, 2021

Praxis Workshop

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## Background & Purpose of this workshop

Visual artists Laragh Pittman and Hina Khan were invited by academic researchers Nita Mishra (NM) and Gertrude Cotter (GC) to facilitate a session for lecturers and staff at UCC looking at creative ways to apply methodologies in the classroom from an anti-racist perspective and with the promotion of ideas of inclusive global citizenship. The purpose was to introduce creative tools for educators to make classrooms more inclusive for non-white, non-Irish students. To open up discussions around race and migration without making anyone uncomfortable in class. According to the facilitators, the purpose was -

we can get participants thinking about what their assumptions and stereotypes about people are and to be aware of the 'invisible whiteness' all around (emails between LP, NM, HK, June 2021).

## Structure & Methodology

Through a dialogical method, we (GC & NM)<sup>1</sup> have analyzed our reflections, written in this paper, using the session structure described below, informal discussions and chat messages during the zoom session. At times, the dialogue appears to be very crude, but it is open, honest, brutal, and raw. At the same time, we discussed the possibility of using our dialogue as a method to open transparent ways of discussing a difficult topic, that of race, inclusion, and 'invisibility' of it all. If the task of development education is to be transformatory then we seemed to be on the right track. Thus, we lay bare our thoughts and ask for trust from participants, researchers, educators & development practitioners acknowledging our differences, our positions, our opposing perspectives on the same event from various angles. One sees it as a process which evoked a lot from its participants while another thought more needed to be said and done to engage educators at a higher level. Both positions are valuable to taking this conversation further.

We had around 12 participants joining us for the workshop. We expected more if not all to join in. But that is never possible. We opened the floor to the two facilitators who made their presentations on the work they are engaged in. Hina's fascinating journey and insights were captured visually, while Laragh's was more through organizing exhibitions along with migrant communities at various levels.

What I have done with this document is to first present my original report, followed by GC's response to various bits of my report of the workshop.

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<sup>1</sup> We are hoping to invite all participants in the next phase, to join/react/add/edit our dialogic reflections without prejudice, with their own reflections, counter-thoughts, reactions to this dialogue between NM and GC. The idea is to be transparent and make visible all that is invisible in our responses which has been beautifully captured in NM & GC dialogue. Invisible White Assumptions versus Invisible non-White Assumptions or invisible whiteness talks with invisible non-whiteness? We could shape this together in the next few years. A dialogue. My sincere apologies to one and all in case you do not agree with any of this or all of it.

## The report

### 1) Introductions

Our introductions took half an hour as we went off tangent discussing different aspects of our lives, artistic and non-artistic. We found musicians, actors, artists, amongst the academic and staff of UCC. We also had a migrant participant who is spearheading a movement on the absence of migrants in development organizations in Ireland. In other words, racism in the development education sector reveals itself.

### 2) Short visual presentation about Art Nomads.

The aim was to challenge the idea that there is ever a static culture in any nation state and to provide ideas and resources for curriculum development.

Hina showed how through her art she has situated herself in the Irish context. Her painting on the gunning down of the Army Public School children in Pakistan by the Taliban a few years ago found resonance with the Irish mother-baby homes' tragedy. Her other works portrayed a split in ordinary lives, and how segregation has always been the case in societies. For instance, cities still have a designated 'red light' area which is set apart from ordinary folk residential sections. Thus art could be used to draw creative maps where we, in classrooms, can situate ourselves within the four walls or outside of it.

Similarly, in schoolyards, when parents come to pick up children, they involuntarily formed different groups and waited for the children. The Irish stand quite chattily, the Indians and Pakistanis' stand together talking in their common language, the Polish chat with the Estonians, Bulgarian and others separately, the Bangladeshi mother stands quietly in a corner, the parents who come from the 'flats' or 'council houses' are perhaps the furthest away. The school does nothing to bridge these gaps. A very few parents weave in and out of different groups. These segregated spaces are everywhere. How do we negotiate these spaces?

### 3) What is your name?

This was a short exercise for everyone in drawing, colouring and making a design about your first name as large as you can on an A4 sheet of paper. This can also be using whatever script you use in your mother tongue. The aim was to respect and bring attention to learning a person's name, it's spelling and correct pronunciation whatever the cultural origin.

An interesting way to negotiate these segregated spaces in a schoolyard context, a classroom or even in conferences where educators gather is to use the name 'game'. It sounds banal and a childish approach. However, the session itself reveal hidden prejudices of the friendly group of educators in the room. It started with discussing meanings behind names and went to question the validity of the use of this approach. Interestingly, the efficacy of this approach was questioned by one who was struggling to 'tell' fellow colleagues in the institution that the English alphabet 'J' is actually pronounced as 'Y' in her name. The reasons behind not 'correcting' fellow colleagues reflects a personal choice and must be respected. It was, however, a moment of reckoning because we as educators do not realize how we are used to 'assimilating others' in our own culture because it may be dominant. A second reflective point arising from this is that it may not be easy for a person of colour to ignore the fact that 'others' are not making an attempt to learn to pronounce her name. So, one gives up, changes, or shortens one's name. There were examples of this from the group itself again. Such examples

are telling of 'invisible whiteness' because we do not question it. We take it for granted that a migrant will probably need to change her name because it's a practical option for her. More interestingly, if we as educators do not question why we give up, turn a blind eye, or never focus on a name which is a core identity of a person, why will ordinary folks give it a second thought. The young student in classrooms is probably more open to these questions, and our role is to facilitate that.

Names have a way of connecting. A few of us lamented upon the fact that our names had no stories, and no meanings. Why were we not named after goddesses locally or globally? However, as we went ahead in our discussions, in the chat appeared 'my granny's name was also\*!'. Whoever would have thought the name of a brown migrant woman academic was also the name of the white Irishman's grandmother's name? A name which was rendered meaningless, suddenly had meaning, a link with the past, and helped situate the person in her Irish-ness. It gave comfort. And this is the takeaway from this session.

#### 4) What have you brought with you?

This short exercise was about everyone sharing with the group any small hand-held item that is important to them. This can be any material object that has some significance that we could talk briefly about to the group. Has this object travelled? where has it come from? What is it for? What does it remind you about? The aim was to learn and share from one another and to be open to discovering something new about other people.

A few of us were ready with our objects for discussions. We heard beautiful teacher-student stories from another part of the world around a wooden figurine which the participant values and looks at in times of academic chaos. We had memories around gifts of a bakelite granny brooch, grandma's measuring cup, to the music of a flute, a father's antique watch, the irreplaceable spectacle case, bells, wooden ladle and spoons, and lead pencils. Conversations led to discussions around how wooden spoons would "terrify any Irish child of a certain generation' to why 'slippers' would do that for children in other parts of the globe! There was potential to discuss on how children were 'managed', what should be considered 'abuse', and what is acceptable in current times. However, child rights and parental discretions can be the subject-matter for global citizenship discourse on another day. A Tibetan bell led to a brief discussion on cow bells and the beauty of Irish church-bells. One could possibly pick on this as an opportunity to delve deeper into temple-bells, other bells, and bring in memories of a distant past, of religious practices, of sharing, of discrimination, of exclusions, race and ethnicity.

More importantly, one of us shared resources on name-coach which explicitly tells us how we should help 'the other' to be able to pronounce our names. We realized that 'identity is complex, multi-layered and not static indeed'.

## Appendix

### ART NOMADS

Art Nomads was formed in 2020 for artists from migrant and diverse cultural backgrounds to stage art exhibitions, create collaborative projects, facilitate talks and workshops. Their unique position and experience gives them a connection to global art making and links to international art galleries, museums, curators, education and research. They gain strength through group action as well as working individually; they live in counties Cork, Dublin, Sligo and Louth and come from diverse art backgrounds including architecture, product design, painting, photography, film, performance, socially engaged practice, poetry and miniature painting.

Hina Khan: Born in Pakistan in 1980, I completed my MFA with majors in Miniature Painting from Pakistan. I am using a mixture of traditional and innovative techniques in Miniatures. I portray social issues, immigration, humanitarian crises like prostitution, gender discrimination, gender restrictions, trauma, child abuse & killing etc in my work. I have chosen Miniature because of its intricacy and delicacy of brush work which tends their unique identity. Most of my work is a mixture of traditional and contemporary miniature. My work is the constant search for the best way to interpret the ideas expresses my own ideologies through symbolism. Shifting my practice to installation, videos, 3D. My art pieces are also in the permanent collection of Arts Council Ireland.

Laragh Pittman: A visual artist with BA and MAs in Fine Art and Digital Media, she uses multiple media for socially engaged and participatory art making and builds spaces for creativity, dialogue and exploration of the fluid and transcultural nature of life in Ireland today. Laragh also works as a curator and project manager with Art Nomads, a collective of migrant artists. She is now working on 'The Invisible City' an exhibition for 5 Lamps Festival in July 2021. Her artwork also includes 'A Perfect Global City' a collaborative and participatory project with WEMIN: Migrant Women Empowerment and Integration, a European funded project in 2019 and 'The Invisible Museum' in Kilmainham Courthouse as part of the 'Citizen Artist' project with Common Ground in April 2019 [www.invisiblemuseum.ie](http://www.invisiblemuseum.ie)

### Resources

<https://www.invisiblemuseum.ie>

<https://developmenteducation.ie/100objects/browse-the-objects/>

<https://onehe.org/eu-activity/introductions-story-of-your-name/>

<https://www.name-coach.com/sanaa-khabbar>

<https://onehe.org/equity-unbound/>