Social Policy & Society (2022) 21:1, 142–150
 doi:10.1017/S1474746421000646

Case Study: Decolonising the Curriculum – An Exemplification

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Coventry University has made a strategic commitment to address the dimension of 'race' in its learning and teaching. Central to this is the establishment of a cross-institution curriculum change initiative called 'Curriculum 2025'. The case study shared here details how we are approaching this task and some early reflections. Two things are explained: first, the provision of resources for staff who want to learn more about possible actions to take; second, our approach to working alongside course teams on new materials, often designed as reusable learning objects. An example of such a learning object is discussed which uses Wikipedia to enable students from diverse backgrounds to examine critically academic texts, books and other resources to understand how their learning may be skewed in favour of Western-originated thought and to identify alternative perspectives. The student activity also provides a co-creation opportunity, in that students are discovering the curriculum for themselves.

Keywords: Decolonisation, curriculum, learning objects, co-creation, higher education.

Introduction

Decolonising the curriculum is variously defined but broadly concentrated on critically engaging with colonialism, empire and racism as a focus of study, and the impact of these forces on what we understand as knowledge; and in turn opening up the curriculum to alternative neglected ways of thinking (Bhambra *et al.,* 2018). It builds on and goes beyond the internationalisation of the curriculum, previously advocated for the study of social policy, for instance (Irving *et al.,* 2005). It is usually advocated on the grounds of social justice (Bhopal, 2017; Winberg and Winberg, 2017; Timmis *et al.,* 2019).

Social justice concerns of redistribution, recognition (parity of esteem) and equity (Winberg and Winberg, 2017) are argued to be counter-narratives to the increasingly individualistic, consumerist and privatised characteristics of the Neoliberal trend in Higher Education (Ross *et al.,* 2018) which sees students as customers focussed on maximising their opportunity and universities as service providers supporting the economy (Zepke, 2015; Deeming, 2016), and bluntly, training people for work (Adams, 2020). This case study illustrates that decolonisation could be well-served by selectively frame-merging these two discourses (Nordensvärd and Ketola, 2019) in order to achieve practical progress.

Nordensvärd and Ketola (2019) argue that neoliberalism involves steering institutions like universities in order better to serve capitalism, which can be illustrated via the existence of the Office for Students (OfS), the Higher Education regulator. A major policy lever that could be harnessed to drive decolonising the curriculum in England is the identification by the OfS that there are unacceptable differences in the experience of students from BAME backgrounds, compared with their white counterparts, which have negative consequences for future labour market prospects. These differences are summarised in the article by Arday *et al.,* elsewhere in this themed issue of *Social Policy and Society*.

One key approach posited to eliminate these differences is through the encouragement of a more diverse approach to knowledge creation. In this sense, decolonisation is used as a policy lever to ensure that learning and teaching affords all students the opportunity to reach their full potential. It is believed that a decolonised curriculum is more likely effectively to engage particularly BAME but also other students (and staff), who feel the curriculum does not reflect their experience and the roles and capacities of others like them (UUK and NUS, 2019). Furthermore, decolonisation affords the opportunity for all students to appreciate the role of power and privilege in terms of what gets taught by whom. It encourages students (and staff) to examine critically our collective histories. Coventry University acknowledges this link in its approved access and participation plan where it identifies decolonisation as a 'significant vehicle of change' in eliminating differences in continuation and attainment for Black and Asian students compared with their white counterparts (Coventry University Group n.d.: 25).

Our approach to decolonisation of the curriculum is to accept, even to embrace, the steerage set by the OfS, and thus to use all available levers that spur action in HE when they are seen to serve both discourses. By developing students' social and emotional skills, such as empathy and respect for others, we argue that we will improve their employability prospects as workplaces become more diverse and global (OECD, 2019) as well as enabling them to contribute to a more harmonious and fairer society.

Approach

Coventry University has committed to a curriculum change initiative called 'Curriculum 2025'. It follows a horizon-scanning exercise into the likely future for our graduates and the skills, aptitudes and capabilities they will need to possess (Wilson and Broughan, 2018). Curriculum 2025 is designed to help shape all courses to meet the needs of future students. Eight key themes are being embedded across course designs which directly address the subject of this special edition: 'inclusion' and its capacity to create a consequent 'sense of belonging', and 'decolonisation' (see Figure 1).

This approach to embedding decolonisation alongside other themes critical to prepare tomorrow's globally aware citizens is holistic, in that it recognises they are interconnected. This is a point of difference between Coventry and many other HE institutions. This alignment means we can, for instance, draw out the inequalities created and sustained by a Western-dominated way of thinking and its impact on mental health and wellbeing, alongside the impact of colonial bias on the approaches to achieving sustainability. We can use decolonisation as a way to recognise the voice of students and also to respond to learning students' want in their curriculum (Muldoon, 2019).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746421000646 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Figure 1. The features of Curriculum 2025

Curriculum 2025 aims to facilitate our students' understanding of their personal contribution to societal outcomes at local, national and international levels and develop a sense of agency (OECD, 2019). The activities promoted by Curriculum 2025 provide an authentic challenge that fosters creativity and innovation, and develops anti-racism capability (Nathan, 2019), currently generally lacking in the sector (Craig *et al.*, 2019).

Importantly the focus is on everyone. By recognising that the production of 'legitimate' knowledge is highly related to the context, class affiliation, and social identity of its producers (Akena, 2012), we are recognising that any failure to acknowledge this puts all learners at a disadvantage; by teaching a partial curriculum we are failing all our students and limiting their critical development. Our approach is inspired by the argument of Mia Liyanage in a report commissioned by the Higher Education Policy Institute that decolonising offers an opportunity to improve course curricula, pedagogical practice and the student experience:

> Decolonising holds the potential to revamp tired courses, inspire disillusioned staff and equip students with the knowledge they need to face the modern world (Liyanage, 2020).

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Application

Two broad approaches are used to support teaching colleagues. First, the Curriculum 2025 team provides a series of courses, resource toolkits, webinars and training workshops for those who want to own their changes independently or to learn more before taking action. This can be important when some of the change required involves contesting what should or should not be in the curriculum and where the level of change required is not clear (e.g. Schucan Bird and Pitman, 2020). Furthermore, it provides an opportunity for academics to 'examine themselves' and reflect on their contribution to this agenda. Secondly, the Curriculum 2025 team provides help and guidance directly, such as by working alongside course teams on new learning and teaching materials whilst, at the same time, respecting that course teams retain academic ownership of their curriculum. Those two approaches are now explained in more detail.

Navigating pathways to change

The first task in asking academics to add new materials and approaches to their teaching and learning practices is to support them in examining what a decolonised curriculum might look like, not least because its definition is highly contested (Bhambra *et al.*, 2018). Building on available examples, academics are offered a framework to re-think what we teach.

We acknowledge that the practical examples shown in Table 1 are conversation starters rather than a complete guide to decolonisation. They are chosen to give those academics unfamiliar with the practice of decolonisation an accessible first step and to assist '. . . . those in the 'messy middle' of race relations: people who want to do the right thing but who have not had, or not known how to create opportunities to engage in reflection and then action' (Harris and Usher, 2008: 23).

Another facility made available to colleagues is the curation of best practice examples we have been able to identify of decolonisation in practice, to enable them to develop their own ideas on how to take their subject forward. There is a toolkit for each of the eight themes of Curriculum 2025, all based on the same model – What is it? Why is it important? – alongside case studies, resources, and ways in which progress might be measured. Importantly, we reflect subject by subject examples of knowledge and practice, enabling academics of, for instance, social policy to be offered an example more easily relevant than one for a subject with different philosophical underpinnings. This is key, given that a holistic approach needs to respect different ontological and epistemological viewpoints at subject level.

Direct support

The second approach to supporting decolonisation of the curriculum across the institution is to provide direct help and advice to academics. This can involve being part of a curriculum re-design process, building learning objects, or doing some initial research for literature or resources. An example of a novel learning object is the use of Wikipedia as a platform to illustrate and address the continued dominance of Western European thought on freely available online reference materials (Prasad, 2003). Trancozo Trevino (2020) estimates that 80 per cent of material currently on Wikipedia is US or Western European. To address this, students worldwide are being encouraged to add new materials as part of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746421000646 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Table 1 Re-thinking what we teach

Who we read	We may have an inherited set text or reading list, or we may have built it based on our own academic knowledge and influences. To what extent is it open to ideas from beyond these limits? Does it reflect learning from other cultures? Or from academics based in the countries where our students may be from or have heritage? Biggs (2020: 13), sets out a literature search strategy to include materials from wider perspectives. How might you use/adapt this as a template to search for new materials that you might use to enrich your current curriculum resources?
What we read about	What structural factors affect what we are likely to be reading about? Who decides on the research which informs our teaching? Where it is done and by whom? This article from the *Times Higher Education* (Grove, 2020) relates how funding from the West influences research into public health. What are the influences on research in your subject which is considered to be leading?
How we teach	Focuses on the "'hidden curriculum' - unintended, implicit and hidden messages sent to students" (Leask, 2015: 8). This includes signifiers about which knowledge and whose knowledge is superior. For example, we might introduce a business case study from India instead of a well-known Western name such as Coca Cola, Facebook or Amazon, but are we critiquing it with the same business/accounting/marketing theory that we used before and emanates only from Western scholarship?
Why we prepare our students to be anti-racist	Our graduates will be stepping into work and social spaces that contain discrimination. How do we prepare them? Nursing education is an example of a subject which is highly influenced by the requirements of professional bodies. These include preparing future professionals and leaders to work in an environment that is inclusive and to deliver equity of care for a diverse population. Yet the experience of being a nurse and providing care can fail to live up to this aspiration (Mapondera 2019: 10). Reflect on the extent to which the professional expectations of your course and the experience of working in or being a customer of your sector might misalign. Consider how you prepare future leaders to be equipped to respond to, and to address, this misalignment.

their studies, citing reliable, authoritative sources (Wiki Education, 2020). With colleagues from the Disruptive Media Learning Lab at Coventry University, we have developed an extended learning object which enables students from diverse backgrounds to critically examine academic texts, books, blogs, opinion pieces and other resources to appreciate the predilection for Western materials and to identify alternative perspectives which will help students thrive in a global environment. This provides a co-creation opportunity, in

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that involvement in discovering the curriculum for themselves encourages 'students becoming more active participants in the learning process, constructing understanding and resources with academic staff' (Bovill *et al.,* 2016). In adapting this exercise to a decolonisation project, students are able to make a substantial contribution to decolonising the knowledge and information used in the curriculum and, as such, we believe, to develop a greater sense of belonging and inclusion, both pedagogically and epistemologically. This is a future in which students become part of the community of learning. They are co-creators who contribute to the agenda and the debate; they do not simply *receive* an education.

Use of Wikipedia to build a decolonised resource of learning materials is designed to align to the relevant QAA Subject Benchmark Statement for a course. The example given here aligns the exercise and resulting summative assessment with the expectations for courses in social policy (QAA, 2019):

Development and ability to evidence the following subject knowledge:

- the ways in which other countries organise their social policies and welfare institutions
- international and global contexts of social policy
- issues and contemporary policy debates surrounding social, economic, environmental, cultural and political problems.

Development and ability to evidence the following skills:

- distinguish between, critically reflect on and evaluate different theoretical, empirical, normative, moral and political approaches to social problems and issues
- understand the political and economic contexts of social policy and ways in which these impact on policy development and implementation.

Social Policy students are also expected to be able to demonstrate graduate skills such as: ability to gather relevant information, manage and manipulate data, and analyse and interpret their meaning; to be sensitive to the values and interests of others; to relate to wider international and global contexts; to convey ideas and arguments effectively; teamworking, and use of information and communications technology. These latter skills align well with the overarching learning outcomes which follow from contributing to a Wikipedia output: writing skills development, media and information literacy, critical thinking and research skills, and collaboration (Wikipedia Education Program, 2014).

A key metric used in judging the success of this initiative is the BAME disparity of attainment data. As set out in the introduction, the OfS has set the Higher Education sector a target to eliminate the gaps in degree outcomes between white and black students. Coventry University is monitoring the reduction of its own attainment gap data using a data dashboard for each course which states the percentage of good honours degrees (1st or 2:1) awarded per subject in Coventry compared with the rest of the HE sector. Prior attainment is taken into account in the calculation. Our theory of change is that the effects on those students experiencing decolonised learning will feed through into these institutional metrics and, over time, we aim for every course to exceed its sector benchmark.

Observations and learning

While the Curriculum 2025 work is in its infancy, we can provide reflections on progress so far. This section first provides reflections on the practical formative learning emanating

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out of the programme. Secondly, we reflect on the extent to which our work is helping to decolonise the curriculum and to challenge institutional notions of 'race' in HE.

Practical formative learning

There are observations worth reflecting on for colleagues at other similar institutions attempting this work. The first is to acknowledge both the competing priorities for attention within HE and the long haul of decolonising the curriculum. The second is the value of giving people permission and practical ways to challenge. The third is to acknowledge that subject areas have different approaches to teaching and learning.

One of the challenges to change in our context is to ask staff to find the time and (head) space to undertake the further scholarship and necessary planning successfully to address decolonisation. This is especially the case currently because of the priority and energy understandably directed towards protecting health as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and to offer learning in either a blended form or online. The goal is to address the partial nature of the knowledge on offer in HE; and that is a challenge in an already pressurised university system. While the call to action is urgent (Craig *et al.,* 2019), decolonisation is an ongoing journey and best addressed, as Liyanage (2020) advocates, at reflective points in the administrative cycle.

Despite the pressures of adapting to teach during COVID, reception for this work has been highly positive. The biggest (declared) barrier is lack of a starting point. Colleagues have reported that fear of 'getting it wrong' or 'not knowing enough to act' was preventing action. The agency afforded by first, the institution's declared support for decolonising the curriculum, and secondly, the activities to support it in very practical ways, has been powerful.

Perhaps understandably, the decolonisation agenda has made more ground in some disciplines. It is conceivable that social scientists, and readers of this journal, are naturally more open to such a critique and respond encouragingly. Those from disciplines that are dominated by a positivist approach may require more groundwork in terms of understanding their contribution to the agenda. Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of writing on decolonisation has been written by social scientists, for social scientists. This is an area that needs addressing. One way we have addressed this challenge is to provide (as outlined above) subject-specific examples that can be taken up without immersion into the theory and approaches of other disciplines. Another is to work in inter-disciplinary teams on real world problems as part of the curriculum.

Wider challenges

This case study has focussed on curriculum change, but needs to be seen in the wider context of institutional change. Gus John is a Visiting Professor engaged as a provocateur to Coventry University. He points out that the work on curriculum has to be seen in a bigger context: 'Decolonising the institution and its leadership is a fundamental prerequisite to decolonising the curriculum. The culture and institutional values and arrangements that frame processes such as curriculum design and content and pedagogy and assessment don't just exist. They are the result of leadership, sound management and a shared vision both of the kind of institution one is seeking to build and of the society one wants those leaving the institution, staff and students, to build and manage' (John, 2019).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746421000646 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The introduction suggested that decolonisation is usually argued on social justice grounds. However, in order that decolonisation of the curriculum moves beyond the pilot phase in the UK (UUK and NUS, 2019) we need to respond to the widest set of imperatives. We argue that decolonisation of the curriculum can offer redistribution, recognition and equity at the same time as contributing to the attainment of other institutional targets. As Craig *et al*. (2019) point out, BAME students' experience of higher education is not as good as that of white students. More 'good' honours degrees for BAME students means better life chances for the individual and concomitant benefits socio-politically and economically. Such outcomes are reflected in metrics which drive universities, such as Longitudinal Education Outcomes data, which enables assessment of how much UK graduates of different courses at different universities earn after graduation. This argument continues for white students. White students are also receiving a partial curriculum and enhancement will prepare them for working and living in an increasingly diverse world.

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