

# Decolonising the curriculum: challenges and opportunities for teaching and learning

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## Abstract

A renewed call to ‘decolonise’ the university curriculum has marked a shift in thinking about education and what should form the canon of curriculum content. It has been amplified further here in the UK by the ‘Rhodes must fall’ campaign. However, fresh approaches and opportunities for advancing practice in teaching and learning, with an aim to diversify the university curriculum for teaching and learning, are not without challenges. Our paper reflects on the meaning of decolonising the curriculum and on attempts to decolonise the curriculum at both institutional and subject-specific level. In this article, which is in three sections, we use examples from our own practice to reflect on some of the challenges of decolonising the curriculum and opportunities for sharing good practices amongst colleagues.

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## Introduction

This article outlines the need for decolonising the curriculum within and beyond the university. The call to decolonise the curriculum, made by students, social movements and academics in higher education, is a call to take seriously the legacy of colonialism in the curriculum. It is also a call to include a diverse range of experience, away from the white hegemonic world view and experience that informs much of our teaching.

This article highlights attempts made by the authors to reflect on and change teaching practice and course design. Moncrieffe identifies the ‘dominant’ Eurocentric perspective functioning as ‘epistemic violence’ in the Key Stage 2 (education for children aged between 7 and 11 years old) National Curriculum for history. He argues that it is a ‘traditional’ default position that should be reconceptualised by the ‘transformative’ perspectives of critical multicultural education. Asare writes reflectively on her experience of teaching about race and ethnicity in the academy. She suggests that in disrupting the present centrality of a White perspective, care needs to be taken not to frame Blackness and the Black experience in a way that is synonymous with ‘deficit’ or ‘victimhood’. Dunford presents on work in progress in decolonising

a first-year core globalisation module. He argues that courses need to be reframed, and not just diversified with different perspectives added in near the end. He also reflects on the challenge of teaching a 'canon' that is fundamentally West-centric. The chapter concludes with reflection on ways in which the university can support staff in attempts to decolonise the curriculum. Key, here, is support for staff who are engaged in this process, and attempts to gather best practices of theorised and applied approaches on curriculum decolonisation made by colleagues across the university and appreciated by students in their teaching and learning.

### **Eurocentricism as 'epistemic violence' in the National Curriculum for history.** MARLON MONCRIEFFE

As a former primary school teacher, now working in Initial Teacher Education, my concern is with producing outstanding teachers that are equipped with critical skills for interpreting and delivering on the directives, aims and contents of the National Curriculum. This includes being able to reconceptualise policy, and where necessary, through innovative and inclusive approaches to practice. My examination and interpretation of the National Curriculum for Key Stage 2 history (DfE 2013) considers the motives and aims in teaching and learning the 'master narrative' of mass-migration and settlement to the British Isles (Moncrieffe 2014; 2017; Nichol and Harnett 2011). The concepts of 'nation' and 'national identity' arrive through this teaching and learning. However, these are concepts depicted rather narrowly as occurring through cross-cultural encounters, i.e. 'the 8th century Viking/Anglo-Saxon struggle' and 'Viking invasions' (DfE 2013, p. 4). The Key Stage 2 National Curriculum for history stops at the year 1066. It provides no other significant narrative of mass-migration and settlement to the British Isles involving cross-cultural encounters between different ethnic groups for children to learn about. It is a National Curriculum for history framed by Eurocentric perspectives of 'nation' and 'national identity'. Here is an example of how a statutory national policy directive for teaching and learning can whitewash and erase the potential of broader and more inclusive multicultural British histories of mass-migration and settlement for knowing about 'nation' and 'national identity' (Kapoor 2016; Lander 2016; Moncrieffe 2017, 2018). In this sense, the National Curriculum for history is a framework of 'epistemic violence' (Spivak 1999), a political and educational tool that can obstruct and undermine non-Western experiences or approaches to knowledge.

### **Transforming approaches to practice**

Critical multicultural education can be applied to challenge the doxa of Eurocentricism within the National Curriculum for history. Arphattananon (2018, p. 4) writes:

'The transformative approach (of critical multicultural education) changes the basic assumptions of the existing curriculum and aims to help students understand concepts and issues from different ethnic and cultural perspectives ... to become aware that knowledge is not culture-free but rather constructed through the perspectives of those who have power. In the transformative approach, students learn the dominant narratives but also alternative narratives. In the end it is hoped that students will be able to think critically about whose narratives are used and the consequences of this. Changing the basic assumptions of the existing curriculum'. (Ibid).

The understanding here, is that reflection on the lives and shared histories of majority and minority groups in societies and communities, can produce innovation and advancement in teaching and learning.

There will be a plethora of narrative episodes and accounts unwritten by the National Curriculum for history concerning mass-migration and settlement by people in the British Isles over the ages. One example is that of the British citizens from the twentieth century African-Caribbean Windrush Generation (Moncrieffe 2018; Phillips and Phillips 1998; Sewell 1998). By reflecting on this moment of national history, I have made connections with how teaching and learning about ‘nation’ and ‘national identity’ can be advanced through the statutory directive ‘the 8<sup>th</sup> century Anglo-Saxon/Viking struggle’ (DfE 2013, p. 4). As human encounters of cultural and ethnic differences, I placed these ‘struggles’ of the past in juxtaposition (see Figure 1) with the more recent ‘struggles’ faced by African-Caribbean migrants and their Black-British children contending with the oppressive and racist White-British led political system (Moncrieffe 2018).

Children in the Key Stage 2 primary school are already learning that ‘nation’ and ‘national identity’ arrives from mass-migration and settlement involving ‘violent cross-cultural encounters’ between the Anglo-Saxons and the Vikings. When this is contrasted with twentieth-century Black-British citizens of the African-Caribbean Windrush Generation and their ‘violent cross-cultural encounters’ with oppressive and racist White-British led political system, congruent themes emerge to advance historical inquiry: power, control, order, equality, tolerance and mutual respect. By reflecting on these episodes of history, it shows that the making of ‘nation’ and ‘national identity’ continues to be developed over the ages by a broad range of ethnic and cultural groups arriving in the British Isles from around the world. Therefore, the fixed Eurocentric perspective of ‘nation’ and ‘national identity’ transmitted by the National Curriculum for history ought to be challenged. I also see great possibilities in how the statutory education policy of ‘fundamental British values’ (DfE 2014, p. 5) can be applied to teaching and learning through the nation’s multicultural history, and specifically, how the nation has come to learn, and re-learn the meaning of ‘tolerance’ and ‘mutual respect of those with different faiths and beliefs’. There is much currency of knowledge available when applying a broader range of historical narratives from a wider range of migrant groups who have come to settle in the British Isles over the ages.

In testing my theories of juxtapositioning on a sample of trainee-teachers, evidence has emerged to suggest that it had some impact in shaping their future approaches



**Figure 1: Eighth-century Anglo-Saxon/Viking struggles juxtaposed with twentieth-century British citizens of the Afro-Caribbean Windrush generation/White-British struggles**

in practice. For instance, some moved from their fixed traditional ways of seeing, to more transformative perspectives on teaching and learning about mass-migration and settlement in Britain over the ages (Moncrieffe 2017). For example:

*'... the Viking raids and invasions. They are quite ... and then Anglo-Saxon laws and justice and invasions, death and resistance and all of those sorts of words might be associated with ... with riots and change and stuff like that and so you have got this chance to contrast'. (Diana).*

*'It's all migration I suppose isn't it?'* (Catherine).

*'Yeah'. (Diana).*

*'... and you can kind of make relations that way'. (Catherine).*

By juxtaposing the dominant 'master narrative' of mass migration and settlement with the marginalised narratives, the past can be connected to the present for understanding future possibilities in teaching, learning, development of knowledge and understanding. This is a process of curriculum decolonisation occurring through the reconceptualisation of knowledge on a theme of teaching and learning. It will take 'commitment' and 'action' (Chilisa 2012) from Initial Teacher Education providers to support and encourage trainee-teachers in enacting these approaches.

### **Inside the curriculum.** YAA ASARE

On reflection, over 10 years of teaching about race and ethnicity in the academy equates to an ethnographic experience of 'what goes on' when students grapple with questions of race in the classroom. The courses I teach explore the impact of race in society, addressing themes including how the education system fails Black students, identity in the context of post-colonialism, and how race and racism relate to the idea of British-ness. As such, they offer a point from which to offer reflections on the project of decolonising the curriculum.

### **Debunking the deficit model**

Having reached university level study, it often becomes apparent that in previous sociological learning, students have learned about Blackness as being both problematic and a position of deficit. Many students use the term 'disadvantaged' to discuss Black people having learned that 'the system' oppresses people of colour. Black people are understood as having absorbed this oppression. The potential damage (for both Black and White students) was brought directly to my attention when a White student said, in a classroom discussion:

*'I was lucky enough to have been born White'*

The idea of Black disadvantage had taken root in her consciousness to the extent that she interpreted white privilege as indicative of her own good fortune. From this position the notion of Black people as unfortunate and objects of sympathy has developed, a caricaturing of a genuine understanding of complex dynamics of race. What then are the implications of such a statement to how we need to teach about 'race'? The suggestion is that this deficit model needs to be debunked and replaced, initially by studying discussions of the bi-racialisation (Ifekwunigwe 1999) inherent in British society. In his critique of the anti-racist project, Gilroy recognises the dan-

ger of this deficit model in discussing the damaging 'ideological circuit which makes us (Black people) visible in two complementary roles – the problem and the victim' (Gilroy 1992).

### **What's going on in the academy in terms of achievement by race?**

While Black and White students are admitted to the university with comparable A-level grades, on graduation, there is a clear statistical attainment gap further on in their studies, along racial lines. This year's Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) student attainment gap at Brighton University, measured in terms of receiving a good degree, was 19 per cent lower than their white counterparts. There are no easy answers here; the complex interweaving of several factors will need careful investigation and discussion including with Black students themselves. This process of investigation is beginning with initiatives from the University's Race Equality Charter Steering Group. The following factors, the final two of which will be discussed here, are likely to contribute to BME students' underachievement:

- Unconscious bias from staff and students
- Stereotype threat
- Not feeling a sense of belonging
- Having few role models
- Institutional discrimination
- The curriculum carrying legacies of colonialism
- The centrality of a White perspective

### **Legacies of colonialism**

Phoenix (2009) speaks about Black girls being positioned as 'undesirable learners' in schools in 1960's Britain. This is due to the pervasive thought processes through which the colonial mentality understood racial difference. The subjects of Phoenix's research recollect experiences of being subjects of a racist discourse in schools, which they resisted, but which was nevertheless damaging. The type of racism that university students today may experience is unlikely to be as blatant as it was for Black pupils in the 1960's but it still exists. Racism is more likely to be experienced today as subtle and cumulative. Essed (1992) researches the detrimental effects of 'everyday racism' in which negative representations and stereotypical ideas of Blackness impact the lives of women of colour in higher education. Unconscious bias training is now given to try to address this more pernicious legacy of colonial thinking. But, before identifying unconscious bias training as the solution, we need to consider the extent to which this focus on personalising racialised reactions is able to impact on the more pervasive structural and institutionalised discrimination (Sivanandan 1985).

### **The centrality of a White perspective**

What can we learn by considering the taken-for-granted normality of whiteness? As shown in the first section, assumptions of whiteness are equated with 'normality' in

curricular material. Pearce (2003) and Gaine (2005) suggest that children absorb this normality at primary school, learning to become distrustful of the racialised 'other'. In considering how we might teach about 'race' in the university curriculum, we need to acknowledge that students might be unwilling to engage with interrogating such long-held assumptions. Mazzei (2008) interrogates the reluctance of White student teachers to even discuss race. This silence equates to an unwillingness of student teachers to see themselves as having a racial position; this lack of engagement is revealed to work alongside a patronising and stereotypical view towards Black pupils. In this way they problematise and victimise Black communities while simultaneously failing to acknowledge systemic racism.

Situated as 'victims' or 'problems', Black people's position and influence in the racial power-play of white hegemony is often silenced and remains un-interrogated in the academy. Hall (2000) suggests that the histories of the colonised and the coloniser are interrelated, but these links are unspoken, not taught about. In order to better understand ourselves in the West, whatever our heritage might be, there is the need to acknowledge the legacy that the former colonisation of much of the Global South continues to have on how we understand our students and teach about the world.

**Decolonising a year one globalisation course:  
reflections on a work in progress.** ROBIN DUNFORD

The way in which the forgotten legacy of the colonisation shapes university curricula became apparent when I took on responsibility for a first-year International Politics/ Globalisation course. The course: (i) contained almost no reflection on the way in which the long history of colonialism and enduring post- and neo-colonial forms of rule continue to shape the world; (ii) taught global challenges, notably environmental decline, from the confines of a very Westernised perspective, and; (iii) had an all-Western and, bar one female co-author, all-male reading list. The West-centrism of a course that addresses theories of *international* politics and *global* challenges is testament to how embedded Euro-American knowledges, and the epistemic violence of the erasure of other knowledges, are in university curricula.

Indeed, this West-centrism is embedded in the discipline, International Relations, that studies relations between different parts of the world. In its inception, people regarded as founders of the discipline were centrally interested in questions of 'race development', of how to 'develop' people that were considered to be inferior. *Foreign Affairs*, the flagship, public facing US international relations magazine, started its life under the name *The Journal of Race Development*, which ran from 1910 to 1919 (see Vitalis 2015). Woodrow Wilson (in Mishra 2017), then US President and regarded an 'idealist' on account of his desire to make the world a better, more peaceful place, claimed that states under colonial rule 'cannot ... rush into the light' of self-government and freedom, but 'have to go through the twilight into the broadening day'. In other words, those of apparently inferior 'races' need to be 'developed' in order to be able to govern themselves. It was on the basis of this thinking that the League of Nations, founded in 1920, introduced a system of 'mandates', where colonised countries would be 'supervised' until such a time that they were deemed 'able to stand alone' (League of Nations Charter).

These ignoble foundings went on to be forgotten. Instead of foregrounding colonialism, the discipline starts the story of International Politics with the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. This treaty is perceived to have put into place a system of sovereign nation states, who have control over what goes on within their territory. 'The treaty of Westphalia ... made the territorial state the cornerstone of the modern state system', said Morgenthau (1965, p. 264), perhaps the most famous 'Realist' International Relations theorist. Even globalisation theorists who claim to move beyond the state-centric discipline of International Relations claim that Westphalia 'entrenched, for the first time, the principle of territorial sovereignty in inter-state affairs' (Held 1995, p. 77). With a world of sovereign states put at the centre, eliminated from view is the fact that, for hundreds of years since 1648, the world consisted of empires and their colonies (Bhambra 2014). Major theories of international politics and globalisation thus erase from view colonialism and its legacy in making the modern world.

The west-centrism of prevailing understandings of international politics and globalisation raises a difficult question: how to decolonise courses that introduce a 'canon' of thought that is west-centric? The project of answering this question with a revised course has only just begun, but three steps have been taken:

**(i) The course has been reframed:** The role of colonialism in constructing the modern world and the role of racism in shaping understandings of international and world politics are taught in the first week. This is a first step in an attempt to frame the course around the legacy of colonialism and the way in which it is forgotten in major theories.

This is only a start. The middle-part of the course still introduces the 'canon' and continues to look like a more traditional course. Making meaningful changes without overloading students with reading is proving a difficult challenge, which might be partially solved by better text-book material, material that is absent in current text books that, as de Carvalho et al. (2011) show, tend to repeat Eurocentric myths. Even with improved teaching resources, these issues will not go away easily. The difficulties of decolonising curricula when a Eurocentric 'canon' continues to dominate have been observed across a range of subject areas (see University of Amsterdam Diversity Commission 2016). This has also provoked reflection. Would it be better to simply 'de-link' (Mignolo 2007, p. 452) from the 'canon', to 'foreground other epistemologies, other principles of knowledge and understanding?'.

**(ii) Perspectives on global challenges have been broadened.** Instead of exploring only Western understandings of environmental sustainability, the course studies Andean indigenous visions of *Buen Vivir* (Gudynas 2011) and peasant understandings of ecological food production (Vía Campesina 2009). Students also ask which knowledges can help address the climate crisis: a 'Western' canon that some consider complicit in ecological devastation, or the communities, including indigenous and peasant communities, who have lived sustainably for years and yet face some of the worst impacts of the climate crisis?

**(iii) The reading list has been 'diversified', but only as a consequence of re-framing of the course.** Decolonising the curriculum does not *only* mean diversifying it. It requires an understanding of how our thinking has been shaped by Euro-American lenses, by the neglect of colonialism in our analytical frameworks, and through epistemic violence.

## Conclusion and recommendations

Our diverse attempts to decolonise the curriculum stem from a long engagement with our subject areas. This has allowed us to call for new approaches to teach about 'nation', 'national identity', 'history' and 'race' in a transformative manner that challenges the long-held assumptions of students, and change a year one course. A 'tick-box' approach which looks only to change the 'race' and gender of authors, or asks staff to indicate what they have done to decolonise the curriculum in validation processes, cannot substitute for this long engagement and fundamental rethinking of how we shape the curriculum. If a tick-box approach is prioritised, staff will spend their time justifying what they are doing in terms of any new requirements. This would not only encourage 'creative accounting', where otherwise unchanging courses are merely re-described to meet the new requirements. It would also take away from staff the time to do the substantive work that is required.

There are a number of ways in which universities can support attempts to decolonise the curriculum. Here, we make two recommendations which follow directly from our above analyses. Whilst important, these recommendations only scratch the surface of the changes, including changes to address a lack of racial diversity in the staff body, that need to be made in order to decolonise the university.

**(i) Time:** decolonising the curriculum involves work over and above the usual requirements for leading a module. It requires new learning, especially for academics who have been taught in Western frameworks. It takes time to find sources and to fundamentally re-shape (and not just cosmetically diversify) courses. Universities would gain a lot from allowing staff to request that work they do in decolonising the curriculum is recognised in their workload planning, with extra hours for course design allocated to staff with ideas for decolonising courses.

**(ii) Support networks and sharing 'best practice':** Given the difficulties in decolonising the curriculum, the more that can be shared in terms of resources, the better. Fortunately, there are moves towards sharing course design, readings and so on, and a growing number of workshops and events on decolonising the curriculum. Continued and extended university support for these schemes is vital.

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