

Critical reflections and collaborative approaches to the University of Lincoln's decolonising projects: A library perspective

Oonagh Monaghan and Hope Williard

University Library, University of Lincoln

Decolonisation is high on the agenda in many universities and library staff are increasingly contributors to the discussions of how these issues affect our collections and our work with students. In this article, University of Lincoln (UoL) Academic Subject Librarians Oonagh Monaghan and Hope Williard outline their backgrounds and interest in initiatives to decolonise the curriculum and equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) from an intersectional perspective. They reflect on how the lessons of library and heritage conferences and events held between 2019 and 2021 influenced their planning and practice at UoL. Potential approaches to decolonisation and EDI within the library setting and plans for future collaborative projects are presented and shared.

Keywords: Decolonising the curriculum, libraries, critical librarianship, coloniality, student engagement

Introduction

This article considers activity taking place at the University of Lincoln (UoL) to support decolonisation, equality and diversity through critical and inclusive librarianship and discusses several significant library conferences on diversity and inclusion that we have attended and the lessons we have learned from them. We also consider longer term how we can think critically about other aspects of the library service so that we are not just offering a contribution to simply place a tick in the 'library section' of the institutional decolonising and equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) check box. Ideas around buildings, learning spaces, worker racial diversity and bias during interactions with students and staff are all areas of ongoing discussion. Historically, academic library workers are predominantly White, but libraries serve an increasingly diverse student body. Acknowledging our own positionality, we aim to be aware of the "culture of whiteness" in the academic library described by Brook et al. (2016: 246). As two White librarians we acknowledge the privilege that has enabled us to have the educational and professional opportunities we have enjoyed within higher education (HE) and the library professions. From a position of social justice, we as librarians should resist "normative notions in librarianship that uphold racist, classist, transphobic, sexist, ableist and heterosexist practices" (Ibid., 249). Within the UoL community momentum has been building around the decolonising agenda and the university has made a submission for the

Race Equality Charter. We aim to use our voices to start a conversation within the library and with colleagues across UoL in active support of these initiatives.

Who we are

We are two librarians working in an academic library who have a passion for equality and diversity. Oonagh Monaghan has been at UoL for over 20 years and has supported a variety of subject areas before settling within the art, design, and architecture subject disciplines. Oonagh is a member of the University 'Decolonising the Curriculum' group and the library liaison member of the College of Arts and School of Design EDI groups. Oonagh felt that the start of her journey into critical librarianship and increasing interest in issues around decolonisation, intersectionality in academia and the library have been much faster paced and natural since changing from the liaison role with psychology and sport to the art and design subjects she now supports. She also recently began supporting PhD research students within the Department of Diversity and Inclusion in the Eleanor Glanville Centre (EGC). The EGC is the UoL department specialising in the development and evaluation of EDI strategies and interventions and their impact across the sector. This additional liaison role, alongside her own educational background and role as an ally to the marginalised transgender community, has allowed Oonagh to reposition herself and focus on this area as part of her professional role.

Hope Williard found herself in the library during her PhD in medieval history and decided to stay there when her studies were over. Fortunately, the library also thought this was a good idea, and she has worked for UoL since 2017 supporting the performing arts programmes and the School of History and Heritage. Working with programmes ranging from technical theatre and stage management to philosophy, she is fascinated by the different ways disciplines in the arts and humanities approach teaching and learning, and the ways these fields spark curiosity, empathy, and lifelong learning. Having taught in university classrooms for the past seven years, her interest in critical librarianship and issues of equality and diversity came from her desire to create classroom experiences that are accessible and inclusive for all students. Like Oonagh, she is a member of UoL's 'Decolonising the Curriculum' working group. Hope is also a member of the university's 'Reimagining Lincolnshire' project, which aims to bring to light the stories of people of colour in the county's history.

Both of us have attended conferences over the last few years which have influenced and guided our professional roles. The emphasis on sharing and discussing existing initiatives within the library profession at conferences and events is a practical and inspirational way to reflect on good practice, share ideas and further discuss how we might translate these ideas in our own institution. Within this article we will focus on events which have been sources of learning and inspiration for us, describing the lessons we have learned about critical librarianship, diversifying reading lists and creative and inclusive pedagogy.

Critical librarianship

Learning more about critical librarianship has been a crucial first step for us, and so we begin our discussion with these lessons. Critical librarianship encompasses a diverse array of ideas and practices, but broadly speaking it aims to put issues of social justice at the centre of what informational professionals do (Beilin, 2018). The first relatively recent event (but pre-COVID-19) that Academic Subject Librarian Oonagh attended, and which stoked the fires in her activist heart, was the UK and Ireland Art Libraries Society Conference (Arlis) in 2019. The event commemorated the 50th anniversary of the conference and called on delegates to reflect on the pioneering past and vibrant future of the society and the conference programme reflected this ethos. There was a clear focus on critical librarianship, decolonising collections, and innovation within the art library profession. Since then she has continued to develop her knowledge of critical practices in libraries, attending the Critical Approaches to Libraries Conference in May 2021. The conference focused on analyses of current equality and diversity practices within libraries with a focus on the lived experiences of the people that work and study in them.

Focusing on users' experiences allows libraries to collaborate with our users and explore our collections in new ways. This was the central lesson learned from attending the 'Excluded Voices' conference organised by the Wales Higher Education Libraries Forum (WHELF) in 2021. The WHELF conference included keynotes, lightning talks and presentations from library and heritage organisations from across the UK. The conference reflected the growing impetus for change from many in the sector. We were both inspired and moved by a talk by Eleanor Harding from the National Trust. It focused on the work that has been done at Penryn Castle in Bangor, Wales. The money to build Penryn Castle came from the profits made from the exploitation of enslaved people on the sugar plantations of Jamaica. Eleanor spoke of the initiatives that have taken place to work with local volunteers, artists, and school children to bring some of these unspoken issues to the forefront. The key elements here were the results of the collaborations and the way collaborators were able to work with the collections in new ways. The most moving part was a written evaluation of a children's poetry workshop about a display of colourful and beautiful dead birds in a jar. Eleanor shared the following comment which was made by a 10 year old boy who took part in the workshop.

"They have taken something beautiful and treated it as if it was not living. As if it was property. This castle is beautiful. These objects are beautiful. But they come from cruelty. Some of them come from cruelty to enslaved African people. Writing these poems made me reflect and think back on the story of Penrhyn. I'm not a very emotional person to tell the truth, but it's important to think about our past, and other people's past. Why does this castle exist? We need to look at the beauty of the past but also recognise our mistakes and build a better future. Why make the same mistakes again?" (National Trust, 2021, para. 12).

Beyond what is on show in the castle, it has stories which are globally relevant and speak to the structural inequalities that we still have today. Those of us who work in libraries, in heritage, and in universities can learn a lot from what this boy says. In libraries, we can approach our own collections and our work with the students and staff who interact with them with the same critical and open gaze as this child. It can be difficult for many people to understand what decolonisation is and understanding can depend on how we interpret and disseminate in our collections.

Learning with students and staff: Collaborative approaches

The materials available in library collections are a part of our own continuing education and our efforts to be of service to decolonising efforts within the university. Before any of us can engage properly, we need to recognise that a decolonised curriculum enables self-understanding and learning about the lives of others (Gopal, 2017). Learning from library colleagues' best practices for supporting and enabling the diversification of reading lists has been another key area of development for us. Adding new resources to the collections is an important part of our role as librarians. It also offers a unique opportunity to collaborate with students and colleagues from across the UoL community.

An example of what this collaboration might look like can be seen in the Liberated Library campaign at Brunel University, which has run annually since 2016. At ProQuest Books Week 2020, Hope listened to librarian Sam Piker introduce the campaign, which asks students to suggest authors and titles to add to library collections, inspired by different themes on each day of the campaign. The 'Liberated Library' event provides a wonderful model for how the whole library team can be involved in efforts to diversify collections. During the campaign, the Brunel Customer Services team set up displays and collected suggestions, the acquisitions team ordered books and the subject librarians offered advice and guidance on promotion of the materials to academic colleagues. The Liberated Library campaign has resulted in the purchase of over two dozen new books, and the project is now entering its second stage, with further development of library collections and wider promotion across the university (Brunel, 2021).

As the success and momentum of Brunel's 'Liberated Library' campaign shows, a key component for success is placing students at the centre of work to decolonise and diversify library collections. At UoL we will be working with collection management policies and reading lists within the library as well as working jointly with academics on projects as part of our Subject Librarian roles. Oonagh was particularly inspired by the work of Laura Elliott and Alice Harvey in their talk 'Liberate Our Library: embedding social justice work in everyday practice' at the ARLIS 2019 conference. This presentation considered an interesting means of creating dialogue around specific texts using Talis Elevate, an online annotation tool which allows a pdf, image, or video to be examined and annotated by a group. Talis Elevate has been widely used in teaching and learning at UoL for the past three years, and it has unique potential to be used as a platform to discuss issues such as decolonising

reading lists. The tool could be used for group analysis and discussion of a challenging text, offering students who might be unsure of what to say in a live discussion a chance to think through their ideas and express themselves in writing. Students can also choose to leave comments anonymously, perhaps removing the fear of saying the wrong thing that prevents many people from engaging in discussions of issues of privilege, discrimination, and social justice.

Understanding the wide range of pedagogical techniques and learning activities that can be used to engage students in these issues has been a further key area of learning for us. These techniques and activities have included experiential learning, student-led curation, and reflective learning. At an art librarians' conference, Oonagh attended a condensed version of a student workshop designed to introduce critical and creative thinking within a library space and how to explore theory through experiential learning. This was led by Viv Eades and Adam Ramejkis (2019) from the University of Arts London in the library at the Glasgow School of Art. The workshop demonstrated a useful way of looking at books and resources we have in the library and discussing them, challenging our own ideas alongside students with the aim to broaden understanding of the place of creativity in library research. Such an approach fosters an openness to uncertainty and serendipity and at the same time recognises the curated nature of libraries.

What better way to teach students that library collections are made by individuals with our own life experiences and blind spots than asking them to curate materials found in library collections? At University of West England, Jane Ojiako and Ludo Sebire (2021) enabled students to become curators of the reading lists, and they also held a zine competition where students designed a zine around a decolonising theme with a prize for the winning entry. At the University of Surrey there is a well-established Student Curator Project with the idea to curate connections with the students through the collections. Catherine Batson (2021) explained that students submit a 200-word idea for a project and if successful they receive a budget and can work on their plan, from curating a reading list, podcast, organising a display or social media campaign. There is a growing archive for the projects in the Surrey library and a social media hashtag #SurreyLibCurator for the latest ideas. We are inspired by these commitments to include students in decolonising projects in creative ways and have two projects in development. The first of these is a Wikipedia workshop and edit-a-thon in collaboration with the Reimagining Lincolnshire project, to take place during the 2021-2022 academic year. The workshop aims to improve the representation of marginalised Lincolnshire voices on pages relating to the county. We will also help members of the university community create informative and fully referenced pages for Lincolnshire figures who do not currently have a Wikipedia entry. Both of us have done basic training as Wikipedia editors and see this as a natural extension of our librarianship skillset and an exciting way to partner with students.

Oonagh is also working with the Eleanor Glanville Centre and with the Human Library to organise a forthcoming event in November 2021, primarily for UoL staff. The aim

of a Human Library is to provide a forum for discussion about potentially taboo topics with 'human books' sharing their experiences and 'readers' 'checking them out' (having a one-to-one conversation) to find out more about their lives (Human Library, 2019). This event will be a useful EDI initiative to incorporate social understanding within the University community and to challenge prejudices and embrace diversity. It is hoped we will follow this up with a second event in 2022 with the wider UoL student community.

In addition to looking outwards and collaborating with members of the university community, we also recognise the need to look inwards and engage in a process of reflective learning. At the UoL library many people who work there are not representative of the diverse student body and we have to recognise our privilege and acknowledge the contextualising foundations of the academic library as being rooted in Western and colonial hegemonic structures. At the Critical Approaches to Libraries Conference in 2021, Oonagh was particularly inspired to hear about the student research project by Sae Matsuno at the University of Northumbria whose project aimed to encourage her fellow students to reflect on the issues of structural racism in HE, libraries and beyond (Matsuno and Hicks, 2021). Sae was able to connect the conference audience with her research by using a reflective and participatory space to explore connections between librarian education, library practices and EDI learning. The theme of reflective learning was continued in a talk about Punk Pedagogy with Maria King, Academic Liaison Librarian at Salford University. Punk Pedagogy is an approach to teaching and learning which has its roots in constructivist theories of learning and stresses the role of the student taking ownership of their own studies within the do-it-yourself ethos. King referred to critical pedagogy theorists including Torrez (2012) who state that punk pedagogy is both a critique of and advocacy against conformity. It is borne out of the punk music ethos and scholars such as Mike Dines (2015) have explored the connections between subculture membership and punk as a tool for learning. Maria's talk highlighted the importance of us all- academics, students, and librarians- being critical learners together. Critical reflection informed by new ways of teaching and learning such as punk pedagogy are essential for any of the EDI and decolonising activities that a university or library undertakes (King, 2021).

Conclusion

The UoL has a 'One Community' philosophy to tackle inequality, prejudice, and discrimination. It has stated 5 core values of equality, understanding, listening, kindness and acceptance and where all members are invited to "get involved and contribute to their university" (University of Lincoln, 2021, para. 2). As librarians we can work with the 'One Community' of professional staff, academics, and students to diversify reading lists beyond adding a few extra books on a few extra lists. Co-creation with students is a major strand of the library work that will be taken forward. 'Student as Producer,' a project initiated by Professor Mike Neary remains the underpinning principle for teaching and learning at UoL (University of Lincoln, 2010), and these principles offer a strong foundation for our collaborative work.

University of Lincoln psychology academics Patrick Hylton and Paul Goddard (2021, 10) suggest three principles for decolonisation:

“Diversify: Seeking out ideas not from our own cultural group - ensure that space is provided for perspectives that might otherwise be underrepresented; Decentring: Bringing to the centre authors with marginalised backgrounds; Deconstruct: Employing thinking that is dialectic (considering the antithesis to our claims) and dialogical (discussion to explore meaning of something) so as to open up space to explore alternatives.”

The Library is central to this process to support the curriculum. By being engaged librarians and by utilising and improving our digital resources, collection policies and reading lists, the aim is to continually explore and discuss with others to inform our practices and collections. In our expanded article in the next issue of IMPact e-journal, we will outline the work we have undertaken so far and future projects around decolonisation, equality, diversity, and marginalised voices. This article has described our first steps and our commitment to challenge historical Eurocentric practices in the library and heritage sector, to work from an intersectional perspective, and to continue to think critically, creatively, and collaboratively about decolonisation, equality, and inclusion.

References

- ARLIS (UK and Ireland Art Libraries Society) (2019) *ARLIS 50th anniversary conference 2019: a pioneering past, a vibrant future*. ARLIS. Available from: <https://duncanhappell.wixsite.com/arlis2019>.
- Batson, C. (2021) 'The Student Curator Project: Curating connections through collections'. *WELF Excluded Voices*, April 22th, Online.
- Beilin, I. (2018) Critical Librarianship as an Academic Pursuit. In K. P. Nicholson and M. Seale (Eds.) *The Politics of Theory and the Practice of Critical Librarianship*. Sacramento Library Juice Press, 195-210.
- Brook, F., Ellenwood, D. and Lazzaro, A.E. (2016) In pursuit of antiracist social justice: denaturalizing whiteness in the academic library. *Library Trends*, 64(2) 246-284.
- Brunel University (2021) *Liberated library* [online]. Available from: <https://www.brunel.ac.uk/about/student-success/Liberated-Library>.
- Dines, M. (2015) Learning through resistance: contextualisation, creation and incorporation of a 'punk pedagogy'. *Journal of Pedagogic Development*, 5(3) 20-31. Available from <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/30317387.pdf>.

Eades, V. and Ramejkis, A. (2019) 'Creative Library Research: Experiencing Theory'. *ARLIS 2019*, July 15th-17th, Glasgow.

Elliott, L. and Harvey, A. (2019) 'Liberate Our Library: embedding social justice work in everyday practice'. *ARLIS 2019*, July 15th-17th, Glasgow.

Gopal, P. (2017). 'Yes, we must decolonise: our teaching has to go beyond elite white men'. *Guardian* 27th October. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/oct/27/decolonise-elite-white-men-decolonising-cambridge-university-english-curriculum-literature>.

Harding, E. (2021) 'Walking the Tightrope: Sharing Histories of Slavery and Colonialism at Sites with Person-led Interpretation'. *WHELF Excluded Voices*, May 24th, Online.

Human Library (2019) *Human Library: Unjudge someone* [online]. Available from: <https://humanlibrary.org/>.

Hylton, P and Goddard, P (2021) Decolonisation and psychology. *The Association for the Teaching of Psychology*, June, 9-11

King, M. (2021) 'Punk pedagogy'. *Critical Approaches to Libraries Conference*, 5th-6th May, online

Matsuno, S. and Hicks, A. (2019) 'Open Aspirations: Enriching EDI learning at a library school through a student-led project'. *Critical Approaches to Libraries Conference*, 5th-6th May, Online.

National Trust (2021) '*What a world!': a creative look at Penrhyn's collection and the culture of colonialism*'. Swindon: National Trust. Available from <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/penrhyn-castle/features/what-a-world>.

Neary, M. (2020) *Student as producer: how do revolutionary teachers teach?* Winchester: Zero Books.

Ojiako, J. and Sebire, L. (2021) 'Involving Students in the Conversation on Decolonisation'. *WHELF Excluded Voices*, April 22nd, Online.

Torrez, E. (2012) Punk pedagogy: education for liberation and love. In: Z. Furness (Ed.) *Punkademics: the basement show in the ivory tower*. Brooklyn: Minor Compositions.

University of Lincoln. (2010) *Student as Producer* [online]. Available from: <https://studentasproducer.lincoln.ac.uk>.

University of Lincoln. (2021) *We are one community* [online]. Available from: <https://www.lincoln.ac.uk/home/abouttheuniversity/onecommunity>.